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Love, Violence, and Creation: Modernist Mediums of Transcendence in Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Prose

Autumn Williams
Eastern Illinois University

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Love, Violence, and Creation: Modernist Mediums of Transcendence in Sylvia Plath's Poetry and Prose

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Autumn Williams

THESIS

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Abstract

Many critics who study Sylvia Plath's works discuss the autobiographical significance of her poetry and prose, labeling her art as primarily confessional. My research shows that Sylvia Plath's awareness of and sensitivity to contemporary and historical cultural events, along with her acute sense of literary tradition, shape her art and widen the scope of critical interpretation. My study, although conceding that aspects of her writing are autobiographical, focuses on the modernist elements in her poetry and prose. By identifying her writing through the lens of modernism, I view her art in terms of its cultural, historical, political, and aesthetic qualities. I conclude that as a modernist writer Sylvia Plath suggests viable alternatives to the modern world's dehumanized condition.

Dedication

To my mother, Helen Williams,

whose voice has carried and shaped my own

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this text:

The Collected Poems	CP
Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts	JP
"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"	"JP"
Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963	LH
The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath	UJ

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Introduction

After Sylvia Plath's suicide on February 11, 1963, literary critics began placing her biography at the center of her poetry. Instead of reading her works as poetic responses to political, cultural, and historical circumstances, critics read her poems as confessions confirming the inevitability of her death. Seamus Heaney, in his essay "Indefatigable Hooftaps," perceives her artistry as defective because of its focus on what he deems as her personal self: "There is nothing poetically flawed about Plath's work. What may finally limit it is its dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition, even though this concern must be understood as a valiantly unremitting campaign against the black hole of depression and suicide" (168). Admittedly, Plath's poems explore the experiencing human consciousness as it responds to a world antagonistic toward life, but to define this consciousness as strictly Sylvia Plath's is the mistake of the critic not the weakness of the poetry. By including Plath's biographical details—her documented and publicized depression and suicide—in his critique, Heaney implies that the speakers of Plath's poems are Plath herself. Consequently, Heaney insinuates, we must make exceptions for Plath's writing, taking into consideration her own mental and emotional instability. However, if we make these exceptions, then we discount the cultural and historical value of Plath's writing; we devalue her art by categorizing it as merely documents of the poet's inner struggles; we place her writing in a personal vacuum, detached from the world around her. Effectually, we say that Plath's writing can be understood or can be made meaningful only if, as readers, we are aware of her personal psychological condition.

Like Heaney, A. Alvarez uses Plath's suicide as a way to critique her poems, but unlike Heaney, Alvarez's response is not a criticism. By placing Plath's writing in a modernist literary movement that Alvarez names "Extremism," the critic legitimates Plath's poetry and prose by connecting it directly to a death-drive, which would inevitably end in self-destruction. In "Sylvia Plath," Alvarez writes:

> The achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable. . . . In a curious way, the poems read as though they were written posthumously. . . . Poetry of this order is a murderous art. . . The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self destructiveness. . . So, though death itself may have been a side issue, it was an unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem. (57-58)

Ironically, Alvarez wrote his critique soon after Plath's suicide. Thus, his own reading of her poetry, not the poetry itself, makes their writing seem posthumous. Like Alvarez, Robert Lowell also alludes to the posthumous quality of Plath's poems. In the introduction to Ariel, Lowell writes: "These poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder, a game of 'chicken,' the wheels of both cars locked and unable to swerve" (vii). These writers make the critical mistake which T. S. Eliot, an influence of modernism and New Criticism, warns against in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (2173). In order to look at Plath's poetry sensitively, we must allow her writing to speak for itself, and her life's details, although tragically interesting, should be used only as an indication of the sort of culture which engendered her writer's response.

Chapter One

Placing Plath in Modernism

Plath's poems are culturally, politically, and historically relevant. At the center of these poems, though, is the human consciousness reacting to the cultural climate of Plath's historical moment. By taking Plath's poetry and prose away from confessional readings, those upon which Alvarez, Lowell, and Heaney focus by continually relating her suicide to her writing, we can view her writing from a modernist perspective. Admittedly, we can easily confuse confessionalism with modernism, for in both singular individuals discuss their experiences within the contexts of realizable situations. Yet confessionalism implies that the poet speaks for him or herself in the poem, while modernism implies that a created persona speaks, using an anonymous, detached, and objective voice to relate his or her struggles to the condition of the culture in which he or she and the rest of our society lives. Consequently, modernism substantiates writing that focuses on the affected human consciousness as it responds to the nature of an industrialized, dehumanized world (Kazin 25).

Modernism combines symbolist and romantic elements. Both of these movements focused on the human consciousness; however, the symbolists, as Alfred Kazin writes in his essay "Background of Modern Literature," " . . . diverted poetic imagination from the transcendental to the subjective" (25). The romantic writers also used the subjective human consciousness as the basis of their writing, but their aim was to derive a transcendental experience from creative perception, pointing to spiritual possibilities that lie beyond the artistic achievement (25). The art itself is not a transcendental end; rather, it is a means or map that leads one to discover a universal connective spirit. For the

romantics, the ultimate form of transcendence is the uniting of the human spirit, or human imagination, with nature and the cosmos, such as Emerson describes in his essay "Nature" (25). Consequently, a romantic writing is "open" because it leads the reader beyond the poem or prose piece.

This differs from the symbolists because, as Kazin writes,

> with the Symbolists the poet not only becomes the highest human being, but is privileged by understanding which he cannot share with anyone else and which, since it cannot even be stated in the poem itself (it is merely suggested) cannot be grasped at all outside the immediate experience of the poem. (25)

For the symbolists, then, a poem is "closed," for it is an end in itself. Modernism, at least for T. S Eliot, is a combination of both the symbolist and romantic movements. The modernist poet does not celebrate the mysterious beauty of the universe like the romantic poet, nor does he or she perceive the poem as an imaginative end as the symbolists did. Rather, the modernist writer transforms subjective perception into an objective tool in order to comment on the human condition and to offer alternatives to this condition. From the symbolists, modernists derive the idea of subjective objectivity. From the romantics, they derive the notion of universal alternatives, which the romantics called transcendence.

The modernist writer achieves objectivity through detached observation. To convey this objectivity, writers such as T. S. Eliot reveal human experience in terms of irony, sarcasm, and "self-mockery" (28). Such detachment serves to represent life in terms of objective reality, no matter how desperate these terms are. In particular, Eliot uses "paradox . . . ambiguity and tension . . . in order to catch the unaccountability of modern

experience" (28-29). Moreover, as influenced by the romantics, the poet points toward alternatives to modern reality that lie outside the poem, but, as influenced by the symbolists, these alternatives are only ambiguously suggested. Thus, modernist writers do seek to transcend the disconnected nature of humanity, but cultural and historical realities complicate this transcendence.

Although Eliot perceived modern life as containing and conveying a sense of hopelessness, he did think that alternatives to this despondency were available through the application of imaginative and spiritual endeavor, which he insinuates in his poem The Waste Land (Daiches and Stallworthy 2138). Eliot, himself, felt traditional religion was one alternative to the meaninglessness and alienation of twentieth-century reality. Through the use of the imagination, one could contact such traditional belief systems, thus giving meaning to existence by reinstating historical institutions as our moral, compassionate, and intellectual models (Kazin 34). According to Eliot, the writer can suggest this through the mythic method, which grants traditional authority to the past (33).

In The Waste Land, Eliot exemplifies the mythic method by juxtaposing Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Greek allusions of consolation and insight with modern images of desperation and ignorance (Daiches and Stallworthy 2138). However, Eliot never directly presents these ancient belief systems as alternatives; rather, he suggests them through symbolic juxtaposition. Thus, Kazin comments: "The revolutionary faith in personal consciousness from which the modern writer started is not merely an esthetic tool but a philosophical and religious achievement" (34). This modernist beginning allows other writers of different generations to rework their predecessors' achievement

into art forms imaginatively responsive to their time, culture, and gender in order to discover a spiritual alternative to the contemporary "Waste Land."

Although Kazin develops a substantiated reading of modernism, his particular view is idiosyncratic, as some interpretations of modernism show that the modernist artists valued aesthetic experience over lived experience, excluding the romantic element of modernist art—the achieving of transcendence in life itself. According to some interpretations, modernism espouses art as the ultimate alternative to politics and a disintegrating culture (Levinson 2), which directly aligns the modernists with the symbolists. However, when a modernist writer chooses an apolitical stance in his or her writing, the writer makes a political choice.

The complexity of interpreting modernism as a singular art movement derives from the makers of modernism who created definitions for their art (Levinson 2), which signified masculine imagination and technique as primary characteristics (Scott 79). Bonnie Kime Scott, in her study, Refiguring Modernism, names Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis as two prominent figures in this movement (79). In her study, Scott notes the privileging of the masculine over the feminine that typified the modernist literary movement (79). She asserts that critics emphasized this privileging by choosing the "men of 1914," which also includes James Joyce and T. S. Eliot as the quintessential modernist writers for the literary canon (79).

Pound's phrase "make it new" along with his "imagist" ideology excludes the relevance of political and autobiographical elements in poetry. Instead, "imagism," which Wyndham Lewis would transpose into "vorticism," emphasizes a quick release of energy through the mastering of the direct symbol metaphorically likened to the exact function

of a technological invention (100). As Scott relates, this linking of technology to creativity favors masculine rationality over constructions of femininity, which Pound and Lewis connected to nature and chaos (92,102). For the artists, making their art new implies expressing original ideas detached from politics and mass culture, for the aged natured of these institutions are inferior to the artists' aim of spontaneous creation. From Pound and Lewis, then, modernism becomes a basis for apolitical, male aestheticism.

Women writers of modernism such as Virginia Woolf willfully incorporated aestheticism, politics, and autobiographical elements into their writing. According to Scott, this weaving together of the personal and political originated from the feminist movement that was occurring in England during the early 1900s:

> [T]he women's movement, as initiated by suffragettes, moves naturally into women's discussion circles and the production of magazines that broadened the perspective of suffrage; the founders took life and art as co-principles. Young women moved from rallies to writing, testing the power of the pen as an instrument of their perceptions, as well as their progressive ideas. (35)

Woolf was involved with this movement, and although her writing exemplifies modernist aesthetics, which directs it toward an audience other than mass culture, it integrates ideas of women's rights, the female identity, sexuality, and patriarchal oppression into a highly modernist art form (50-52).

The qualities of high modernism are outlined by Michael Levinson in his introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Modernism: "the recurrent act of fragmenting unities . . . the use of mythic paradigm, the refusal of norms of beauty, the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment, all often inspired by the resolve . . . to startle and disturb the

public" (3). Aesthetically, Woolf's writing embodies these characteristics; however, as a feminist woman, she uses the modernist qualities to subvert political and cultural standards established by the patriarchal tradition (Henke 622).

As a writer of essays, Woolf defines the responsibility of the modernist writer in "Modern Fiction:"

> Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. . . . At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. (107)

Thus, Woolf emphasizes that writers should explore the human consciousness as it reacts to everyday happenings. Imbedded in this idea is the foregrounding of the female consciousness, "something hitherto ignored," something "commonly thought small." Simply by privileging the female psychology over masculine tradition, Woolf enters politics.

In "Professions for Women," Woolf polemically advocates that women should write, should tap into their imaginations, and should reveal the desires of their bodies that have for so long been a source of shame. But in order to awaken the imagination, the woman must kill "The Angel in the House." Simply put, this visage is the image of female

"purity," undoubtedly invented by the patriarchy as a force of institutional control. This force, Woolf kills:

> Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed. (286)

After the angel's death, the woman writer can enter into her imagination (perhaps what Pound deemed as chaos) no longer imprisoned by the patriarchal institution and the male dominated literary canon.

Still, however, the "Angel in the House" exists, if not directly within the woman's consciousness, then within the societal domain. She is the patriarchy's construction of women, whose bodies, curiosities, and desires are all controlled by the angel's conception of the female. Woolf figures this patriarchal angel as the barrier that exists between the privacy of feeling and the publicity of expression. Women are contained within the confines of thought and dream, unable to express these inner realities because the public, masculine world would revolt against and further marginalize the female mind. Woolf symbolizes the female unconscious, those innermost dreams and thoughts, as a wide body of water, and the woman writer, as a sleeping fisherman, whose line rambles freely throughout this underwater world:

> I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for

> minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers that with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. (287-288)

The woman's conscious awareness of male reason intrudes into her dream and restrains her from publicly expressing the aspirations of her imagination. Woolf contextualizes these aspirations through the body, which historically has been dominated by the power dynamics of heterosexual relationships. In this power structure, a woman's body breeds more bodies and becomes a receptacle for and extension of her husband's physical

desires. Her imagination obeys, though in silence revolting, the sexist reality of the male / female relationship.

For Woolf, then, if the imagination is to speak, to express itself, then a woman must remove her body from degradation. The dreamer's unmentionable bodily desire involves the linking of her body to her imagination, creating a language of the body that is neither demeaning nor conceptive of patriarchal limitations. Woolf implies that the female body and female imagination work conjunctively; if the body feels controlled by an outside presence, then the imagination will feel contained, responding to its restraint in silence.

Although the image of the "Angel in the House" seems far from the depiction of women in Plath's age, she still sits on the would be writer's shoulder, whispering denunciations, reminding the writer of her body's social role, of its responsibility to produce more bodies, offering little or know attention to the writer's dreams that exist outside patriarchal expectations. In a journal entry during July 1951, Plath writes of the difficulties that her female body imposes upon her writer's imagination and her desire for life experience outside the mandates of the patriarchy:

> From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than a penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity. Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars—to be a part of a scene, anonomous [sic], listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. (UJ 77)

The woman's body as matter only leads to a sense of enclosure and fear for any woman. She must perceive her body as men perceive it in order to be aware of their desires, which

Plath denotes in terms of violence. The "Angel in the House," linking women to matter, serves as a protection against male violence by severely limiting the possibilities of female experience. The angel image denies a connection between the potential of the female body and the potential of the imagination because in a united form these yoked entities would inevitably destroy female purity and expose the falsity of patriarchal constructions of the female's identity.

As a modernist, Plath grapples with this "Angel," and in this grappling, Plath reveals the lies of the patriarchy and offers alternatives to the age of meaninglessness in which the detached human consciousness struggles. Like Eliot, Plath perceives imagination and creative endeavor as two alternatives to the modern day "Waste Land." However, unlike Eliot, Plath does not espouse religious institutions as viable solutions. In fact, in Woolfian fashion, Plath's writing conveys that these institutions are a major catalyst for the biased and hierarchical society in which we live. What instigates her rebellion toward traditional institutions is her gender. For women, Christian culture mandates certain codes of behavior, mainly marriage, childbirth, and caretaker. The struggle between self-expression—individuality—and the institutionalized female demeanor ordained by society generates Plath's poetry and prose.

Plath's 1962 short story "Mothers" depicts the disparity between Christian love and Christian hypocrisy. Christian love, the story shows, is not universal love. Its hierarchical system pronounces some as deserving, while casting others, in particular those with individual beliefs and uncommon habits of expression, outside of its embrace. The story primarily revolves around Esther, a married woman and mother just moved to

the Devon area. Looking for community, Esther decides to attend the Mothers' Union—a local Christian group.

After first moving to the area, the local rector visits Esther, and immediately Esther feels the inability to express her true beliefs:

> Esther welcomed the rector with some misgiving. She told him right away that she had been brought up a Unitarian. But the rector smilingly replied that as a Christian, of whatever persuasion, she would be welcome in his church. Esther swallowed an impulse to blurt out that she was an atheist and end it there. Opening the Book of Common Prayer the rector had brought for her use, she felt a sickly, deceitful glaze overtake her features; she followed him through the order of service. . . . She hadn't the heart to tell the rector she had been through all this pious trying ten years before, in Comparative Religion classes at college, and only ended up sorry she was not a Jew. (JP 14)

Beneath the historical presence of Christianity, Esther's identity cowers. If she expresses her individuality, she will bar herself not only from the rector's acceptance, but also from the acceptance of the local population, whom, as the leader and spokesperson for the community's foundational beliefs, the rector represents.

At the Mothers' Union church service, Esther tries to convince herself that the individual differences that separate her from the group are inconsequential compared to their shared bodily experience: "Esther felt the baby throb and kick, and placidly thought: I am a mother; I belong here" (15). Esther learns, however, that, although a mother, she does not belong to the group, for the group condemns personality. Later at the church

tea, Mrs. Nolan asks to smoke, but she is prohibited from doing so, not because no other women smoke, but because of some unwritten law:

> Mrs. Nolan looked up at the woman with the tea. "Can we smoke?"
>
> "Ooh, I shouldn't think so," the woman said. "Not in the church rooms."
>
> "Is it a fire law?" Esther wanted to know. "Or something religious?" But nobody could say. (17)

Finally, the Christian group's behavior completely disillusions Esther. Her need for their brand of love dissolves. She experiences anger at their hypocrisy, particularly when the rector blatantly embarrasses Mrs. Nolan:

> The rector made some odd, jocular reference to never finding Mrs. Nolan in—at which her clear, blonde's skin turned a bright shade of pink, then said, "I'm sorry, but the reason I've not called is because I thought you were a divorcee. I usually make it a point not to bother them." . . . The rector finished with some little welcoming homily which escaped Esther, so confused and outraged was she by Mrs. Nolan's predicament. (18)

Mrs. Nolan realizes her mistake at coming to the meeting and whispers to Esther that she should leave. Esther and Rose, a Mothers' Union member, exit the meeting with her.

At the end of the story as Esther and Rose walk home, Rose and Esther talk of Mrs. Nolan's exclusion, smoke cigarettes, and walk arm in arm:

> "I didn't know they didn't allow divorcees," Esther said.
>
> "Oh, no, they don't like 'em." Rose fumbled in her pocket and produced a packet of Malteser. "Have one? Mrs. Hotchkiss said that even if Mrs. Nolan wanted to join the Mothers' Union, she couldn't." . . . The two women passed

> under the churchyard, with its flat, black yew, and as the chill of evening wore through their coats and the afterglow of tea, Rose crooked out one arm and Esther, without hesitation, took it. (19)

Although Esther cannot find conscientious belonging in the Christian group, she does find companionship in the solidarity of honest women.

"Mothers" contrasts freethinking and dictated belief. Esther does not tell the rector her true ideas about religion for fear of exclusion. Mrs. Nolan, on the other hand, has made, at some point, her divorced status known. The story even insinuates that Mrs. Nolan is not even a mother. Mrs. Nolan talks of Ricky whom she paints, but Ricky, we come to learn, is a hamster. Mrs. Nolan desires to belong to the Mothers' Union for companionship, for love, but Christian belief and bias bar her from doing so. Esther observes the hypocrisy of the Union and chooses her own friendships, not because Christian rules influence her decision, but because her personal values defined by indiscriminatory love, empathy, and individual expression delineate her choice. Thus, in "Mothers" Plath's primary alternative to religious hypocrisy and communities of hierarchical structure is imaginative, not prescribed, compassion.

Plath responds to persecution by and exclusion from hierarchical societies in a number of ways, which reflects her Woolfian sensibility. Aesthetically, Plath combines modernist elements such as symbolic juxtaposition, imagism, and literal and figurative fragmentation to express the tension and release of energy erupting. Combining Woolfian politics with modernist form, Plath creates a unique writing style grounded in the modernist tradition, but newly fashioned to fit the psychological and social complexities of her age. In her writing, we see the alignment of Pound's "make it new,"

of Eliot's "historical sense," and of Woolf's feminism and focus on the human consciousness.

Her poem "Elm," from Ariel, personifies a tree through a woman's voice. Formally, the elm tree models the imagist concept, as the psychological impressions from the female mind are embodied in the image of the elm. The image is concrete, yet surrounding it are the abstract notions of history and human psychology. These abstractions are given shape in images of opposition—silence and noise, love and hate, life and death, nature and technology—that meet in a tense centrality. The juxtaposition of mute emotion and physical pandemonium creates a hot friction, releasing an annihilative energy where implosion (unarticulated female emotion) and explosion (linguistic and technological forms of male knowledge) meet and merge into a violent vorticist force.

"Elm" also envisions the effects that modernity has on the individual consciousness, reminiscent of Eliot's The Waste Land and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in which heterosexual love repeatedly fails in a technological landscape that separates human beings from the natural world (Scott 122) and from a primitive perception that views the world as transcendently connected (Bell 21). In "Elm," technology perpetuates indiscriminate killing, and the tree-persona reveals how pollution (a technological byproduct) has literally annihilated its once natural existence (Brain 107). As a woman, the persona comments on how this same pollution, as well as a spiritual contamination, has attempted to destroy love's possibility.

Like "Mothers," the poem points toward the imagination as a resolution to isolation by perpetuating empathy, leading an individual to discover a community in which similar

sufferings are shared not hidden or denied. Tracy Brain, the author of The Other Sylvia Plath, writes: "'Elm' is one of many poems in which Plath explores the consequences of isolation, and argues against the impulse to hold oneself as separate from the rest of the world . . ." (108). The poet resolves this impulse by combining two separate entities—woman and tree. Together these entities unite to protest against the destructive forces that lead to isolation—"A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek" (lines 20-21)—and to relentlessly search for love despite the pain involved in the quest—"Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievable? / Is it for such I agitate my heart?" (35-36).

The poem's environmentalism evokes images of nuclear warfare and chemical insecticides. The former concern comes from Plath's conscience appalled by the American use of the atom bomb in World War II, and the latter concern, according to Tracy Brain, relates to Rachael Carson's environmentalist book Silent Spring (106). Plath writes:

> Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
> This is rain now, this big hush.
> And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.
>
> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires. (13-18)

The "sound of poisons" is silence. The vehicle for the sound is rain—acid rain. The poison kills life forms, leaving them voiceless. In addition, Brain writes: "Silent Spring

tells us that arsenic is 'the basic ingredient in a variety of weed and insect killers'" (106). Thus, the offspring of the contaminated rain is a poisonous fruit—"tin-white, like arsenic." The vegetation resulting from the life-giving, life-destroying rain carries the poison of its parent, just as a human child inherits its parents' genetic traits, some positive and some negative, and just as women inherit a cultural tradition that seals the female imagination in silence. In both instances the offspring of the human parent or parent culture is maimed. Plath's lines create a paradox that comment on the contradictory forces of culture and creation: the fruit, formed from the toxic past of its parent, is a living death.

"Elm" also elaborates on Woolf's concern for the woman's body. Plath represents the body in the tree form. As a tree, the body, objectified by its passivity, is a target for masculine violence. In the poem, technology and the byproducts of it represent masculinity. Recalling Plath's journal entry, the external force of the masculine world exerts its energy in violent forms onto women and, within the context of the poem, onto nature.

Lines sixteen through eighteen refer directly to nuclear warfare. The "atrocity of sunsets" is the bomb's bright blast enveloping the horizon. Instead of this sun perpetuating growth it breeds destruction, eliminating possibilities of natural beauty. What remains is an artificial nature. Tree limbs have become metal "wires." Tree bark is "filaments," which connote threads of metal. These two stanzas show how American culture, in its drive to establish itself as primary authority in all realms of existence, commits suicide. By ruining what it deems as a peripheral world, it will eventually die by its own violent forces.

The next stanza shows further violence and the resulting protestations: "Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs. / A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek" (19-21). The images show a woman-tree physically disintegrating into fragments. The victim, however, is not passive. Her "shriek," although not linguistically articulated, protests against the abusive forces. Nature no longer stands in meek passivity. By embodying the woman's self, nature has the opportunity to respond to its victimization and to perhaps perpetuate change.

"Elm," a nature poem, contains romantic elements, although in complex ways. Reminiscent of Emersonian philosophy, the poem represents a spiritual and even physical merging with nature. Tim Kendall the author of Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study, writes:

> [Emerson's] insistence on integrating the external world—or in Emersonian terms, 'the NOT ME'—into the soul is an ambition which Plath's poetry shares, albeit in surprising ways. . . . The dilemma for Plath's personas is that they are Emersonians in a brutal, non-Emersonian universe. (25, 26)

Kendall establishes a firm connection between Emerson and Plath. He even goes so far as to say that Emerson "is perhaps the most pervasive presence in her work" (25). By relating Emerson to Plath, Kendall finds validation for Plath's focus on the self in her poetry (26). This validation annuls arguments such as Heaney's which find what it interprets as Plath's self-focus as a detriment to her writing. Yet by looking at this "self" focus in Emersonian terms, we open Plath's writing to new interpretative possibilities.

For example, recalling Emerson's "transparent eyeball," when contextualized within the modernist environment that Plath's works depict, such perceptual embodiment proves hazardous (27). If the perceiver embodies an environment infiltrated by human

pollutants and radioactivity, then the perceiver is literally contaminated and potentially annihilated by sickness. Moreover, if the contamination of nature is metaphorical, where nature has assimilated human violence in response to its own victimization, then merging with it would empower the perceiver with a sort of brutality in retaliation to the same type of cruelty that nature has undergone at the hands of humanity.

Thus, in the context of "Elm," merging with nature achieves not spiritual peace, but angry, even anxious empowerment. One cannot assimilate the self with nature and expect to achieve the transcendental experience about which the romantics wrote, for history and culture have contaminated both nature and human consciousness. While assimilation with nature will perpetuate a spiritual embodiment of truth, this truth is a sick one that speaks of a pervading violent culture.

Recalling Woolf's depiction of the "Angel in the House," we see that historically women and nature have been viewed as passive entities, an idea Plath repeatedly confronts (Strangeways 24). In a letter to her mother, dated March 28, 1956. Plath writes about the dilemma of being an intellectual woman in a culture which reserves this characteristic for men. Within the letter's context, the comment serves as an indication of the writer's difficulty in discovering male companions who would share serious conversation with Plath, rather than typifying her as an object, like nature, on which to gaze. Plath writes: "[S]o many Englishmen think women become unfeminine when they have ideas and opinions" (LH 232). Thus, by voicing their minds, women risk losing their cultural value—physical beauty.

In Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows, Al Strangeways summarizes this cultural bias that objectifies women, characterizing their intellectuality as inert: "The 'ideal'

woman, in men's eyes, was solely capable of subjective response, unable to engage in intellectual, rational thought: women, as the prejudice ran, were closer in some way to nature than to culture" (24). "Elm" in modernist fashion ironically revises this stereotype by showing the effects that culture has on nature and consequently women. Plath allows for the connection between woman and nature to exist, yet the connection Plath creates demystifies the logic behind the original patriarchal association, for in this context the male technology that Pound and Lewis associate with order and precision perpetuate chaotic destruction.

The woman's voice in "Elm" further confuses patriarchal stereotypes by its detached tone. The detachment creates the effect of objectivity—a way of perceiving which has historically been viewed as beyond a woman's perceptive capability. Chillingly, the voice reflects on the self-danger involved in the desire to love:

> I am inhabited by a cry.
>
> Nightly it flaps out
>
> Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.
>
> I am terrified by this dark thing
>
> That sleeps in me;
>
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity. (28-33)

In this universe, love has become a source of feared violence. By loving another, one will hurt him or her with love's "hooks." Meanwhile, the need to love slowly injures, with its parasitic "malignity," the beholder of the human compulsion. The speaker's objective tone and imagistic language allow these lines to create an imagined reality,

while simultaneously representing and reflecting the problem of loving in the modern world. The desire to love, Plath relates to the body and soul, for the body provides a container in which desires lurk as suggested by Woolf in "Professions for Women," yet once love allows another person, a man in particular, to possess the female body, then her soul follows suit, sentencing death to an autonomous female imagination.

Problematically, the female's awareness of unequal power structures in traditional culture influences her to react against its teachings. In her introduction to "Cultural Critique," from The Gender of Modernism, Brenda Silver finds a similar cultural awareness in the writings of Virginia Woolf: "What distinguishes Woolf's perspective on tradition and cultural values from . . . men's is a divided consciousness, or double vision, that is inseparable from her consciousness of herself as a woman and her distrust of priestly male authority" (648). Contradictory impulses inform a woman's soul. Thus, according to this "double vision," to love in a patriarchal culture means to make oneself victim to the traditional forces that alienate women, for love in this context is another force of alienation—exiling one from oneself and from one's imaginative capacity. Ironically, loving, despite the knowledge of its harm, is inevitable if women attempt to reform culture. Yet, the "double vision" allows the woman to identify the inevitability and warrants the responsibility of initiating changes through privately and publicly critiquing her culture and the types of love that it deems as permissible. According to Silver, "In Woolf's perception, expressed most forcefully in Three Guineas, women not only can but must exploit the contradictions engendered by their liminality to reveal the partiality of the reigning truths" (649).

Undoubtedly, the woman stands divided on both the inside and outside of her culture, and this division gives her a redemptive vision unique to her gender.

In Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry, Thomas Weiss comments that ". . . the poems in which [Plath] examines the elements of modern love are not traditional love poems and do not carry much hope. . . . [L]ove itself has become infected with the brutality of the external world" (55). Ironically, the catalyst for this type of "brutality" is knowledge:

> I am incapable of more knowledge.
>
> What is this, this face
>
> So murderous in its strangle of branches?—
>
> Its snaky acids kiss.
>
> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
>
> That kill, that kill, that kill. (37-42)

The narrator seems to distinguish between two types of knowledge—masculine and feminine. Masculine knowledge has created the nuclear war machine that annihilates civilizations, the insecticides and industrialized culture that breed pollution and acid rain, and the logic that perpetuates discriminatory power structures. Because the narrator identifies this knowledge as masculine, she, in protesting against it, threatens heterosexual formations of love, which would in turn endanger human procreation. While the narrator is still capable of a "shriek" and a "cry," subjective, female responses, "more knowledge" would render these kinds of expressions mute, and they instead would be articulated linguistically, paralyzing love, a purely emotional expression, in the grip of

language. The alternatives to masculine authority suggested by the poem are female self-assertion, such as the speaker's "shriek," empathy, such as the tree and woman have for one another, continued love, despite the painfulness involved, and the development of a language, or the recognition of an already existent knowledge, that does not privilege patriarchal conceptions of the world.

Plath's ability to depict objectively a brutal and gruesome world is what leads some of her critics to focus on the poet rather than the poetry. By relegating Plath's writing to a personal mental condition, we can avoid taking responsibility for the cruelty of our own culture. Peter Holbrook, for instance, in Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence, examines Sylvia Plath's psychology claiming that she was "schizoid" and because of this mental illness " . . . her rejection of certain kinds of femininity . . . and what she says about male and female and other subjects is grossly distorted and false" (2). He says that we can detect certain "schizoid tendencies" by identifying the "cool," detached tone of voice that she uses when confronting serious emotional issues like Esther's attempted suicide in The Bell Jar (11). Holbrook, however, is mistaken on at least two points. First of all, the tone of voice is a literary device that allows us to see emotion objectively. Second of all, it is her narrators who speak not Plath herself.

The disconnected humanity that Plath depicts in "Mothers" and "Elm" reflects a reality that severs emotions from violent and degrading circumstances. Moreover, despite the "death drive" that Alvarez detects as her creative force and the "nihilism" that Holbrook identifies as defining her poetry, Plath continually implies legitimate forms of emotional coping in her writing. Again and again, her prose and poetry suggest that the

assertion of individual imagination, love, even if in unconventional manifestations, will save us from the alienation and isolation of modern culture.

Chapter Two

Imaging Silence: Finding a Voice for Imagination

Plath's writings explore different causes for individual isolation, which she observed and experienced throughout her life. This concern, indicative of her modernist sensibility, is particularly influenced by Eliot and Woolf. In some writings, Plath critiques a patriarchal culture for its perpetuation of female oppression. In others, she explores the detrimental effects that scientific and technological advancements have upon male and female members of our society. Such concerns make her a cultural and political writer, for in America politics informs and influences culture and both are in a continual discourse. Although personal experience allows Plath to identify with the speakers of her poetry and prose, the mythology and imagistically symbolic nature of her writings exempts them from solely the confessional genre.

As a creative female writer, Sylvia Plath acutely responds to patriarchal causes of female alienation and isolation. Becoming a recognized writer, Plath's dearest ambition, immediately excludes a woman from the social norm, for the patriarchy conditions women to become helpmates, not spokespersons. Despite this, Plath graduated summa cum laude from Smith College and was honored for her literary achievements in English (Axelrod 34). However, at her graduation ceremony, Adlai Stevenson, a liberal politician and presidential candidate, whom Plath greatly respected, gave this advice to the female graduating class:

> Women never had it so good as you. In short, far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of our day, it brings you back to their very center and places upon you an infinitely deeper and more

> intimate responsibility than that borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines and make the news. . . This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you're clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television. I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife. I could wish you no better vocation than that. (34-35)

Although Stevenson speaks in the early 50s, his words echo the advice of the Victorian "Angel in the House," which women modernists sought to overthrow.

Stevenson outlines the cultural expectations for American women. Despite their intellectual achievements, women should work as a man's helpmate and a child's caretaker. Stevenson's word choice endorses patriarchal stereotypes suggesting that women can make important cultural and political differences only through influencing their husbands. In addition, this influence comes in conniving forms; thus, the "clever" ones "practice . . . saving arts on that unsuspecting man." Effectually, women should stay hidden within the home, using any intellectual and imaginative capabilities as aids for their family's development.

Stevenson's description of the woman's cultural place creates a terrifying predicament for the woman writer. How can she write and expect society to accept her? How can she write and expect to find love? In September 1951, Plath describes her conflicting responsibilities: the woman's responsibility in a heterosexual relationship and the writer's responsibility in voicing her imagination:

> I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger

> circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect. . . . Still being a woman, I must be clever and obtain as full a measure of security for those approaching ineligible and aging years wherein I will not have the chance to capture a new mate—or in all probability. So, resolved: I shall proceed to obtain a mate through the customary procedure: namely, marriage. . . . I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man's insides, submerging my-self until his purpose becomes my purpose, his life, my life, and so on. One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with newfound selfless self. . . . (Yet I will not, I cannot accept any of those solutions. Why? Stubborn selfish pride. I will not make what is inevitable easier for my-self by the blinding ignorance-is-bliss "losing-and-finding" theory. Oh, no! I will go, eyes open, into my torture, and remain fully cognizant, unwinking, while they cut and stitch and lop off my cherished malignant organs.) (UJ 99-100)

Plath depicts the traditional role of the woman as one that requires female silence: she becomes an appendage of her mate, voicing his opinions, answering questions with his answers. Plath uses water imagery to describe the drowning effects of a heterosexual relationship. Submerged in the man's imagination, his desires, his causes, the woman is silenced. Yet, if she were submerged in the water of her own life, her own imagination, as Woolf depicts, the woman could find ways of subverting patriarchal control, of perhaps even expressing her body, unrestrainedly. However, in Plath's depiction, the female body—a woman's defining characteristic—is a source of anxiety, restricted by the

timeline of securing a heterosexual relationship. Matter ages, decays, and loses its objective value.

Despite Plath's obvious concern with becoming a wife, she decides that she would rather express her own imagination. However, this interest in her own creative potential, Plath defines as selfish. Recalling Stevenson's description of a woman's role as a man's helpmate and as a child's caretaker, a woman who disregards these responsibilities would, through a patriarchal perspective, be categorized as selfish, self-centered, and loveless. Plath views her choice as dangerous. It places her body in a perilous position, where the "malignant organs"—her female anatomy—are amputated. Again, Plath's internalization of the male perspective reveals her double consciousness: her awareness of herself as writer as well as her awareness of herself as man-defined woman.

Violence and the Imagination: Expressing Self-Love

From The Collected Poems, "Purdah," dated October 1962 and written during the same period as many of the Ariel poems, depicts the silencing a woman feels in a heterosexual relationship. The poem entwines the modernist elements of Eliot's mythic method and the sparse word choice endorsed by Pound's imagism. Influenced by Woolf's feminism, Plath creates a political poem that responds to patriarchal control by focusing on the female consciousness that seeks to kill the image of the "Angel in the House" invoked by the groom's patriarchal expectations.

Through the Christian image of Adam, the poem points to a cause for the silencing: "Jade-- / Stone of the side, / The agonized / Side of green Adam, I" (lines 1-4). Plath describes the woman as stone—a silent, inanimate object. She is only a part of the man,

not even an autonomous "I." In addition to employing the Christian myth in her poem, Plath also alludes to the Eastern cultural practice of literally veiling women. In the critical study Chapters of a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Judith Kroll locates the origin of the word "Purdah" and defines its literal meaning: "The word 'purdah' actually means 'veil' (it is a Persian word for curtain, and derivatively a Hindi term for a veil, curtain, or screen for the seclusion of women)" (156-157).

In line six, the speaker describes herself as "enigmatical." She cannot be understood because her appended position gives her no voice by which to explain herself. Yet, an enigma connotes a positive description, for it implies power, although this power is hidden behind the metaphorical "purdah." Her silence enables her companion to interpret her as passive, and it also perpetuates an aura of mystery that envelops her. Cultural mandates have conditioned the male companion to deem this woman as an object, which historically reflects masculine expectations. These expectations further augment her mysterious air. Because of the limitations placed on his imagination by the patriarchal conditioning, the groom does not have the perceptive capability to understand the causes for or implications of the woman's silence. Unable to discern her own character, he projects his being onto her. Lines eighteen through twenty-three represent this situation:

> I gleam like a mirror.
>
> At this facet the bridegroom arrives
> Lord of the mirrors!
> It is himself he guides

In among these silk

Screens, these rustling appurtenances.

The man's presence overwhelms her own personality; thus, as a mirror, the woman reflects the man's hopes and beliefs. He does not see an individual in his wife; rather, he sees himself. Consequently, the male reflection masks the woman's self-expressive desire.

This desire, however, builds within the speaker, as she contemplates her subordinate position and how this position imprisons her self-expressive possibilities:

I am his.

Even in his

Absence, I

Revolve in my

Sheath of impossibles. (29-33)

The speaker recognizes that the prison of female subordination is only a "sheath," a covering. If it is only a covering, then it can be removed. Because the speaker describes herself as an enigma, she implies that her "bridegroom" is ignorant of the temporariness of the power structure within their relationship.

In stanzas thirteen, fourteen, seventeen, and eighteen, the speaker repeats the words "I shall unloose." The repetition builds tension toward the climax of the poem, the final stanza in which the speaker figuratively kills her husband. The line "I shall unloose" implies the removing of her veil, her "sheath of impossibles," which silences her voice. As the speaker repeats the line, she divulges exactly what she will remove or release from

herself. She will first unloose "One feather," then "One note," and finally, "The lioness, / The shriek in the bath, / The cloak of holes" (39, 42, 55-57). The poem ends in violent action. The "holes" that the speaker inflicts on the "cloak" imply that she has stabbed her husband, killing him. However, the "cloak" recalls the "sheath of impossibles," whose newly created "holes" make possible the exiting of her expressive self.

"Purdah" is a mythic creation which allows for the possibility of violent vengeance to occur. Ironically, the poem evokes a comic sense of self-mockery, when the speaker says, "Attendants of the eyelash! . . . Attendants of the lip!" and calls repeatedly "Attendants! . . . Attendants!" (13, 16, 24, 25). To have such servants reveals an unflattering narcissism about the speaker. Yet it seems plausible that this narcissism reflects the objective status that history has placed on her; after all, she does describe herself as a mirror, an object metaphorically reflecting this culturally constructed environment that alienates her. She mocks these cultural conditions when she calls herself "So valuable!" and "Priceless and quiet" (8, 34). Such descriptions of value connote objects, such as jewels, rather than a human being. The speaker toys with this connotation in order to deconstruct its meaning, for after the murdering of her husband, her objective value and the silence imposed by this value must be questioned.

Plath reinforces the mythic quality of the poem by alluding to Aeschylus's Oresteia, in which Clytaemnestra stabs her husband Agamemnon (O'hara 85). In the Oresteia, Cassandra describes Clytaemnestra as a "lioness" (Aeschylus line 1272), and she foresees his murder: "a thrash of robes, she traps him— / writhing— / black horn glints, twists— she gores him through! / And now he buckles, look the bath swirls red— / There's stealth and murder in the cauldron, do you hear?"(1128-1131). Later from the bath, Agamemnon

cries: "Struck deep—the death-blow, deep—" (1369). Thus, Plath's "lioness," "shriek in the bath," and "cloak of holes" allude to Clytaemnestra and the murderous action she carries out on her husband.

The poem recalls Eliot's mythic method, but the myths, Christian, Eastern, and Greek, that Plath chooses give authority to a violent history. Plath uses the Christian image of Adam and Eve and the Hindi image of the purdah to reveal the degrading and biased attitudes that patriarchal institutions hold toward women, while the Greek allusion gives substantiation to the imaginative possibility of a woman gaining power through violent self-assertion. In the poem, violence becomes a positive form of self-expression. Admittedly, such a solution is questionable; however, the violence is more of a threat than an actuality. The speaker says that she "shall unloose" the action, although never releasing the vengeance she imagines. Moreover, as a result of meditating upon the relationship's unequal power structure, the female speaker defines her own personal value, opposing the sort of objective value placed on her by society, for it is that which she mocks. What she values is the power of her imagination, which allows her to love herself. Self-love perpetuates the anger she feels toward the oppressive patriarchy and gives her a means of imaginative escape to thwart the oppression.

Conformism and Consumerism: Fearing a 1950's America

Many of Plath's writing's explore the consequences of an oppressive culture, one which attempts to coerce individual imaginations into conforming to a societal norm. In "Purdah," one consequence results in the contemplating of violent action toward the male instigator of the oppression. However, Plath also recognizes the problematic issues

concerning gendered conditioning that includes both men and women. Males, too, are expected to conform to cultural mandates, which teach "proper" ways of perceiving the world around us. Thus, a patriarchal culture also limits the imaginative possibilities of men.

Plath points toward the patriarchy as one source of human conditioning, but during the 1950's another form of cultural conditioning took place—consumerism (Booker 2). In The Post-Utopian Imagination: American Culture in the Long 1950's, M. Keith Booker claims that the post-World War II and Cold War period invoked confusion and fear in the average American. Americans were confused about their own personal identities, as well as the identity of their nation. In addition, they feared both conformity and individuality. Booker explains:

> Emerging from World War II as the most powerful nation on earth, America occupied a position of global prominence it had never had before. This very prominence, especially within the vexed climate of the Cold War, required a rethinking of national identity that triggered a national symbolic crisis. For one thing, America's new place as a global power helped to create a siege mentality in which Americans felt threatened not merely by the communist ghouls of the Soviet bloc but by the savage hordes of the Third World. For another, the new prosperity of 1950s occurred within the context of a consumerist ethic that derived its energies from the creation of a never-ending and unquenchable desire that, by its very nature, made true satisfaction impossible. (2)

As a strong global power, Americans developed an accompanying fear, for when any group holds power they intrinsically fear the loss of it. Thus, individuality, particularly

during this period, threatens the basis of the power structure, for to maintain power the political structure must have uniformity. One way Americans created autonomy was through the consumerist or capitalist ethic. By striving for material gain, individuals struggled together, feeding the capitalist machine, broadening the base of economic prosperity.

This capitalistic machine, however, forever feeds. As technology advances, more individuals are needed to support its advancements. Consequently, more jobs become available, and the economy continues to prosper. As a result, though, humans become subordinate to the machine's functioning, losing their individuality, their humanness. Thus, during the 1950s Americans encountered several fears that stemmed from technological and scientific progression. They feared the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the loss of the economic prosperity which they currently experienced, and dehumanization—the sacrificing of their own imaginations to America's capitalistic drive:

> The greatest American fear of the long 1950s, of course, was the fear of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Soviets, along with the associated fear of communism in general. But Americans of the decade, especially white middle-class Americans, were afraid of all sorts of other things as well. They feared a loss of individualism through their absorption into the corporate structure at work or seduction by mass culture at home; on the other hand, they feared that they might be too individual and thus might be found to be "abnormal." . . . Americans were caught in a crushing double bind of alienation and routinization. On the one hand, they were terrified of being different, of not living up to the images of normality

> constantly beamed into the new television sets in their suburban living room; on the other hand, they were terrified of losing their individuality altogether, thus joining the series of anonymous and interchangeable cogs that made up the gears of the corporate machine. (7, 9-10)

This entrapping "double bind" has different consequences for Americans. Many of Plath's writings evaluate these outcomes. Her poem "Paralytic," dated January 29, 1963, depicts a man who detaches, emotionally, physically, and mentally from the outside world, unable to respond to the pressures of cultural responsibilities. In the poem "An Appearance," Plath creates a persona who identifies with technological oppression and personifies this technology. She empathizes with its condition and recognizes the similarities between the mechanical apparatus and herself. This recognition, however, allows her to distinguish between her dehumanized self, who sacrifices her humanity for the sake of cultural politics, and her genuine self, who maintains an objective perspective allowing her to see the flaws in her societal role of wife and mother and who establishes the imagination as the only culture to which she belongs. Finally, in the short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," Plath writes of a female who looks for release from cultural pressures through imaginative escape, although, eventually, the conformist institution that employs her punishes and condemns the rebellious woman.

As seen in "Elm," Plath often equates technology with violence because it has no conscience, and the individuals who orchestrate technology lose conscience as they participate in dehumanizing acts. This equation comes from modernism, beginning with the romantics and symbolists, who criticized science for its severing of reason and emotion as science tends to detach reality from the human conscience (Kazin 22). T. S.

Eliot's The Waste Land and D. H. Lawrence's The Rainbow are two modernist works that emphasize technology's negative impact on humanity. "Elm" re-connects reason and emotion by logically and mythically showing the environmental, scientifically provable, and the human, emotionally experienced, effects of pollution and nuclear warfare—byproducts of scientific advancements. In the poems "Paralytic" and "An Appearance," and the short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," Plath examines the detrimental effects that a technological and conformist culture has upon both the individual and society.

The Genderless Silence in "Paralytic":

A Man's Alternative to Feeding the Machine

The Ariel poem "Paralytic" depicts an individual, presumably male for he refers to his wife and daughters, who has lost emotional contact with the outside world. Instead of emotion, he feels a sense of frozen panic. The speaker echoes the character of Septimus in Virginia Woolf's major modernist work Mrs. Dalloway. In Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus loses his emotional and psychological touch with the social world after he returns from World War I. Septimus cannot identify with his wife, Rezia, and he only finds spiritual communion in the natural world of trees. Because Septimus cannot integrate his own psychology into the "normal" world of socially constructed heterosexual relationships, he commits suicide—an attempt, perhaps, to return to nature, where social constructions of identity cease to exist.

In "Paralytic," Plath uses the image of nature as an alternative to the socially constructed world. By integrating Buddhist ideas into her poem, Plath relies on

modernism's mythic method. She also incorporates the modernist idea of a "primitive" state of being into her poem. According to Michael Bell in his essay "The Metaphysics of Modernism," "As a literary convention primitivism allows the civilized to inspect, or to indulge, itself through an imaginary opposite" (20). Unlike the humans in our modern world, who are separated from nature and instinct because of technology and constructions of social civility, "primitive man was believed to have had . . . a psychological continuity with his world" (21). Bell asserts that primitivism is not just an "alternative state, but an alternative worldview" (21). Primitivism in "Paralytic" offers the detached speaker another way to see his world as well as himself. By accepting an "alternative worldview" the speaker enables himself to venture beyond the constructions of civilization that physically and psychologically injure him and to perceive the world in a way that not only gives him emotional value, but that by its very nature, allows him to enter into a culture of connected transcendence.

The speaker of "Paralytic" seems to suffer from a metaphorical shellshock. He is unable to sublimate his own emotional desires with the responsibilities mandated by society. The speaker states: "It happens. Will it go on? / My mind a rock, / No fingers to grip, no tongue," (lines 1-3). Plath uses the image of a "rock" to represent psychological paralysis. This individual has entered a state of non-responsiveness, just as a stone cannot psychologically respond to its environment. Because of this state, the individual is also silent, muted by the outer forces that have damaged the mind, as well as the body. In Wolf Masks, Thomas Weiss writes: "'Paralytic' reveals the state of one who is overcome and immobilized by hostile forces. Physical paralysis is used to describe that psychological and emotional vacuity in which one's only desire is not to go on" (51-52).

Lines four through ten further describe the speaker's detached condition:

My god the iron lung

That loves me, pumps
My two
Dust bags in and out,
Will not

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape.

These lines ambiguously suggest that the speaker suffers from a legitimate physical illness, not just a psychosomatic condition. While the image "iron lung" could describe the physical sensation of pressure one feels in the chest when confronting a difficult situation or a tragic event, Tracy Brain believes the image should be understood more literally. Brain writes: "The poem's male speaker lies in a hospital bed paralysed, describing his hospital room and physical situation. The poem examines quite specific effects of environmental pollution on the human body" (119). Brain cites Rachael Carson's Silent Spring as documenting the types of physical and mental damage that chemicals such as insecticides can inflict on the human body. Brain writes: "She describes the effects of organic phosphates. These 'have the power to cause lasting physical damage to nerve tissues and . . . to induce mental disorders. Various cases of delayed paralysis have followed the use of one or another of these insecticides'" (119-120). Thus, the poem implies that the malady from which the man suffers results from

contact with his environment. Since men are stereotypically considered a household's provider, his occupation presumably leads to his physical illness.

The "iron lung" is an actual hospital device, and in the 1950s its use was widespread among polio patients, who were mostly children. Brain points out that the "iron lung" is usually used in the treatment of "infantile paralysis," which Sylvia Plath knew for she had underlined the definition of "iron lung" in her dictionary (120). Furthermore, Brain believes that this sort of treatment makes sense within the context of the poem, for the male speaker's paralysis

> results not just from his loss of motor functions (nerve damage that might be caused by his exposure to poisons), but also from his estrangement from the mother and from femininity. He describes a movement from the primary bodily relation of the infant with the mother ("No fingers to grip, no tongue") to a relation with the male technology that has replaced her ("My god the iron lung"). . . . The speaker himself becomes an instrument. Like a vacuum cleaner, he sucks dirt and pollution out of the air and into his lungs or "Dust Bags." . . . The speaker has regressed into an "infantile paralysis" and needs an artificial mother to breathe for him, to keep him alive. (120)

The idea that the speaker suffers from a sort of infantile regression is reinforced when he says:

> The starched inaccessible breast.
>
> Dead egg, I lie
>
> Whole

On a whole world I cannot touch. (16-19)

The breast could symbolize that of his mother, to which he no longer has access. "Dead egg" refers to his infantile condition, which is dead because he is an adult whose present life is located within the manufactured, technological world, not within the mother's world of instinctual protection and nature.

Until the ninth stanza, the poem's tone suggests panic from the need to overcome the condition. Yet in the ninth stanza, Plath offers an alternative to panic—acceptance:

I smile, a Buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings
Hugging their lights

The claw
Of the magnolia,
Drunk on its own scents,
Asks nothing of life. (33-40)

The speaker transcends his state of panicked paralysis through spiritual acceptance by giving authority to a philosophical alternative not normally endorsed by Western ideology. The speaker identifies the core of his problem as cultural. He denies the "unquenchable desire" of the "consumerist ethic" (Booker 2) and instead emulates nature—calm resignation. Moreover, if Brain's reading holds true, then by identifying with the natural world, the speaker finds a way to legitimately contact a form of femininity that does not apply capitalistic pressure to his being. As in "Elm" Plath allows

the patriarchal stereotype of the woman / nature correlative to exist, but she uses the stereotype as a therapeutic alternative for men who find themselves becoming appended to the technology with which they work. By identifying with nature, with the complacency of Buddha, the male individual—the stereotypical familial provider and protector—can escape industrial dehumanization.

Yet Plath complicates calm resignation and the passive feminine demeanor, historically associated with nature, by the image of the magnolia as a "claw." Recalling Kendall's insight into the connection between Plath and Emerson, we can interpret the persona in the poem as emulating nature. However, as Kendall points out, this is a "non-Emersonian universe." Thus, through the image of the "claw," Plath potentializes nature. A claw has the potential to attack, yet the magnolia has chosen not to do so. Instead, it loves itself. Its aura of unified, pure beauty invites others to emulate its self-control, to remember that violent rebellion is always a possibility, but that, at least for the moment, complacence is the better choice, and through this complacence, recognizing life in terms of peace becomes an alternative to violent retaliation and to the paralyzing stasis of non-commitment.

Love's Mechanics: Finding Female Identity in "An Appearance"

Plath depicts the problem of consumerism in many ways throughout her writing. She views consumerism as a catalyst for the decaying human consciousness because it replaces or distorts the traditional authorities of culture, such as religion, community, and familial bonds. Human emotions, whether violent or peaceful, can be expressed or nullified through consumer spending, depending on the product of interest, perhaps a

gun, perhaps a television. Moreover, the female identity—typified by domestic duty—becomes a complicated expression of machinery and love. In the 1950s particularly, the home becomes a consumer advertisement that links mother's love to the washing machine, the dishwasher, the vacuum, and other household appliances through which the corporate culture defines and limits a woman's identity.

From The Collected Poems, the poem "An Appearance," dated April 4, 1962, suggests an ambiguous relationship between humanity and machinery. The poem represents domestic objects, such as an "ice box," a sewing machine, and possibly a washing machine. These can all be associated with female domesticity, which implies the gender of the speaker as female. In addition, in stanza four, the speaker analyzes the condition of love. This analysis along with the domestic duties the speaker fulfills suggests that she is a mother and a wife, consequently female. Surrounded by these objects of domesticity and identifying with them, she becomes objectified by her close participation in their functioning.

In the association of technology with masculine rationality, the identification of the female speaker with her domestic machinery results from a male vision. In "An Appearance," the containment of the female by her technological companions suggests the image of a heterosexual relationship controlled by male dominance as depicted in "Purdah." "An Appearance" not only describes the dehumanization, affecting both males and females that occurs in an industrial society, but it also critiques an oppressive patriarchal culture. The appearances of different objects, some named directly and some only suggested, create fragmented and uncertain understandings of the poem. Each

stanza offers another object on which speaker comments, and, through this commentary, Plath creates a cultural, political, and private discourse.

The speaker states, "The smile of iceboxes annihilates me. / Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one! / I hear her great heart purr" (lines 1-3). In these lines the speaker's identification with the domestic appliances overwhelms her own identity. Within the realm of the kitchen, the machinery has become feminized; thus the speaker describes it as a "her," whose motor is a "heart." Furthermore, if the speaker's self has been "annihilated" and the machinery has taken on human characteristics, then we can assume that the female speaker's identity has indeed merged with the "other," with the technology that perpetuates dehumanization, and it is this dehumanization that the speaker describes—both her heart and her blood are controlled by electricity, by industry.

In the next lines, the speaker blends the functions of multiple objects with different human actions: "From her lips ampersands and percent signs / Exit like kisses" (4-5). The lips have previously been attributed to the icebox, for it is the icebox that smiles. Moreover, an audience can perceive this image because of the icebox's door, whose opening is shaped like a smile and which opens and closes like a mouth. However, the "ampersands and percent signs"—literal symbols—complicate the icebox image. An object to which these literal and numerical symbols do belong, however, is a typewriter, and the human image of a kiss can be construed from the action of the typewriter when its hammers hit paper. Furthermore, the literal symbols that sit on the typewriter's keyboard oppose imaginative symbols created by a poet who uses the typewriter as a recording device. The former classification gives authority to the machine—the

typewriter itself—while the latter identifies the authority as the individual, who dictates the machine, using it as tool which gives concrete form to imaginative expression.

Lines six through nine complicate the identity of the speaker and introduce another reference to the pronoun "her." Earlier, "her" has referred to the icebox and typewriter and the speaker's merging with them, but in line six "her" seems to refer to an actual objectified person, a machine person, independent from the previous machinations: "It is Monday in her mind: morals / Launder and present themselves" (6-7). Here, "her" refers directly to the persona of the woman created by constant domestic activity. Morals and laundry become relatives, connected by cleanliness. The former represents pure, unadulterated thought and action; the latter represents a domestic activity—cleaning clothes—through which one achieves a propitious appearance. We visualize a woman doing laundry and thinking the thoughts that a wife and mother should think. Unlike the other instances where "her" has referred to specific objects in relation to the speaker, here "her" refers to an actual person, turned object by her domestic duties.

Line eight, introduces a female's objective voice, which comments on the confusing nature of the previous statements: "What am I to make of these contradictions?" This is the voice of the actual speaker, the one who describes how the objects around her dehumanize her, the one whom the icebox annihilates. She realizes that the statements she makes are confusing: objects take on human characteristics, and the qualities of some objects blend with others; humans become objectified, and their personalities transform into extensions of machines.

The objective speaker continues. She questions the nature of love—the emotion which has initiated her objectification, for it is the love of her husband and children, which has placed her in her current female role:

> Is this love then, this red material
> Issuing from the steel needle that flies so blindingly?
> It will make little dresses and coats,
>
> It will cover a dynasty.
> How her body opens and shuts—
> A Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges! (10-15)

Love, itself, has become just another household object. The thread that slides through the needle of the sewing machine and the clothing that results from the speaker's labor has come to represent "love." Through the description of the objectified love that "will cover a dynasty," we recall the imperial notion of love which instigates not only the colonization of cultures, but also, within the context of the poem, the colonization of the female body and psyche. The speaker sees the objectified emotion as detrimental to both her physical and imaginative self. As a watch, the woman reflects the passing of time through aging, and the opening and closing motion of the female body suggests two legs, while the jeweled hinge conjures a male perspective of the historically mocked and mythologized vagina.

In the final stanza, the speaker again comments on the confusing nature of her feelings of objectification: "O heart, such disorganization! / The stars are flashing like terrible numerals. / ABC, her eyelids say" (22-24). This is the speaker's second reference to the

"heart." The first, however, refers to her domestic persona, the one whose domestic surroundings and duties construct her identity. The second refers to the "heart" of the objective speaker. This heart still lives and distinguishes between her true nature and her dehumanized one. This heart has initiated the poem's discourse, attempting to delineate between object and self, imposed duty and imaginative impulse. From the objectified self's perspective, the stars have lost their mystery. As "numerals" they merely represent scientific thought—astronomy rather than astrology, and the ABCs that her eyelids blink are merely direct records of her surroundings and duties, devoid of imagination and poetry. The organized forms of numbers and letters result from rational thought, like machinery, and historically we associate reason with the male mind. Within the context of the poem, these numbers and letters are boundaries blocking the objectified persona from the imaginative and emotional self.

The title "An Appearance" recognizes that the woman in the role of domesticity is not the true self; it is indeed simply an appearance, and the culturally standardized duties that she performs are again only appearances. The poem identifies woman's double consciousness that Brenda Silver ascribes to the feminist vision of Virginia Woolf (648). The particular double consciousness of the speaker in "An Appearance" enables her to view the limitations that the patriarchal culture has imposed upon her through the image of the "Angel in the House" and to perceive the existence of an alternative self not defined by male conception. The true self is the speaker who can analyze the nature of her roles as wife and mother and who can question the value of a love that allows imagination to disintegrate. By acknowledging that objectified love denigrates self-worth and blurs self-image, the speaker allows for the possibility of another love to exist, one

that opposes objectification. She does not accept the sort of identity that the poem depicts. Rather, she blatantly questions and mocks the self that succumbs to the expectations imposed on it by a politicized and industrialized culture.

A Dream for the Future:

Performance and Protest in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"

Sylvia Plath wrote about fear, the same fear which Booker describes in The Post Utopian Imagination: the fear of conforming, the fear of being oneself, the fear of being annihilated by forces outside one's control. Because America's culture is grounded in politics, the political structure perpetuates social fear in order to keep power located among a select few without the rest of society responding through violent unrest. If we fear the government, fear our own natures, and fear the "other" from whom the powerful protect us, then we will not confront the structure that enables power distribution. In her poetry and prose, Plath imaginatively responds to this political culture that induces social fear by "writing back" to it. In the critical study, Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics, Robin Peel explains this responsive process: ". . . the expression 'writing back' reads Plath's poetry and fiction as performed responses to the would-be controlling forces of state and institutions, forces that operate on a national or global scale" (15). In "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," dated December, 1958, Plath uses a mental institution as a metaphor for the "controlling forces" that have the power to strip one's identity from the individual and coerce him or her into conformity. What saves one from utter conformism is fear, which can be employed as a tool of subversion. Fear of

conformism encourages one to undermine the higher powers, while keeping a culturally mandated appearance through the act of performance.

Although marriage is not an overt subject of the story, the water and technological imagery in the text encode an underlying message that implicates the marriage institution. The protagonist of the short story, a secretary for a mental institution, works incognito as a dream collector. Her performance as secretary is indicative of a female's social identity in a heterosexual relationship. This is the self perceived by her husband and by society at large, the self that conforms to the rules of marriage and to the rules of the patriarchy. Her dream collecting pastime, however, reflects the image of Woolf's woman in "Professions for Women." As a dream collector, the secretary shows her belief in the imagination's potential.

The men dreamers in the story represent the degrading effects that industrialization has on the psyche. The dreams that the secretary collects reveal that the men's close involvement with technology has warped their perception of themselves as human beings. Now, their identities are wedded to their workplace technology, just as the female's identity in "An Appearance" is defined by her domestic machinery.

Plath foregrounds the female consciousness in the story. The protagonist's consciousness extends beyond self-awareness and enters into the guarded psyches of the men and women who come to the mental clinic. This webbing of psychologies shows Woolf's influence, such as in Mrs. Dalloway, when Clarissa's memories and emotions entwine with the secret thoughts of the individuals around her. In addition to Woolf, Plath's blatant anti-materialism on which her short story focuses shows a direct connection to D. H. Lawrence, particularly his novel The Rainbow. In February 1958,

shortly after the date for "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," Plath writes that Woolf and Lawrence both influence her imagination and encourage her writing:

> I felt mystically that if I read Woolf, read Lawrence—(these two, why?—their vision, so different, is so like mine)—I can be itched and kindled to a great work: burgeoning, fat with the texture & substance of life: this my call, my work: this gives my being a name, a meaning: "to make of the moment something permanent": I, in my sphere, . . . neither psychologist-priestess nor philosopher-teacher but a blending of both rich vocations in my own worded world. (UJ 337-338)

"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" combines the anti-materialist concerns of Lawrence, the feminist and psychological interests of Woolf, as well as the modernist interests in primitivism and myth to create a unique vision of political protest encoded through metaphor, symbol, and image.

The protagonist of the story draws a distinct difference between the doctors and her. They "practice their dream-gathering for worldy ends: health and money, money and health" ("JP" 161), while the protagonist refuses to perceive the dreams as possible money makers (Brain 97). She views them more as works of art, as grotesquely beautiful products of the imagination. Her valuing of art over "worldly ends" draws a distinction between mass consumer culture and the supremacy of the imagination. The original modernists, particularly the "men of 1914" espoused art as supreme—better than the sordid masses (Levinson 2). Yet within the context of Plath's story, the protagonist's valuing of this particular art—the dreams of the masses—distinguishes her from the

original makers of modernism. Because she collects these dreams, she reveals herself as implicitly interested in the psychological welfare of laboring individuals.

In coveting dreams, the dreams which the institution attempts to rid its patients of, the secretary hopes to immortalize the imagination's subculture rooted in this particular historical moment that has given birth to Johnny Panic:

> When people ask me where I work, I tell them I'm Assistant to the Secretary in one of the Out-Patient Departments of the Clinics Building of the City hospital. This sounds so be-all end-all they seldom get around to asking me more than what I do, and what I do is mainly type up records. On my own hook though, and completely under cover, I am pursuing a vocation that would set these doctors on their ears. In the privacy of my one-room apartment I call myself secretary to none other than Johnny Panic himself.
>
> Dream by dream I am educating myself to become that rare character, rarer, in truth, than any member of the Psychoanalytic Institute, a dream connoisseur. Not a dream stopper, a dream explainer, an exploiter of dreams for the crass practical ends of health and happiness, but an unsordid collector of dreams for themselves alone. A lover of dreams for Johnny Panic's sake, the Maker of them all. There isn't a dream I've typed up in our record books that I don't know by heart. There isn't a dream I haven't copied out at home into Johnny Panic's Bible of Dreams. This is my real calling. (152-153)

The dreams that the protagonist collects are fragments of individualism; they are forms of imaginative escape unique to each person. But interestingly, within the context of the story, consequently the context of our culture, these dreams exist because of fear—the

fear of industrialization replacing one's identity. Johnny Panic—the god of fear—perpetuates dreams, while the institutional world attempts to destroy dreams and Mr. Panic. If his dream world were to become reality, the conformist culture, the corporate machine, the societal norm, and the political power structure would all experience destabilization. The dream world would overthrow the "institution." Thus, Johnny Panic must be kept in check, and individuals like the secretary must also be monitored as she threatens to destroy the fragile balance of social perception.

The dreams that drive individuals to the mental clinic are frantic ones, those instilled by feelings of panic and entrapment:

> This one guy, who works for a ball-bearing company in town, dreams every night how he's lying on his back with a grain of sand on his chest. Bit by bit this grain of sand grows bigger and bigger till it's big as a fair sized house and he can't draw breath. Another fellow I know of has had a certain dream ever since they gave him ether and cut out his tonsils and adenoids when he was a kid. In this dream he's caught in the rollers of a cotton mill, fighting for his life. Oh, he's not alone, although he thinks he is. A lot of people these days dream they're being run over or eaten by machines. . . . I wonder, now and then, what dreams people had before ball bearings and cotton mills were invented. (154)

These dreams all contextualize the body. While Woolf writes of the body as significant to the female imagination, in the industrialized culture the victimization of the body becomes a genderless concept. Plath shows that the male body is integral to male imaginations also. Because these men's bodies have been dehumanized through factory

work or literally fragmented by scientific innovations, violent circumstances, in which the body has no control, infiltrate the males' imaginative spaces.

Tracy Brain sees Plath's short story as a commentary on the damage inflicted on a population living in a polluted, industrialized environment:

> . . . "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" has an environmentalist context—a concern with individuals and their connections to their world—that moves beyond any representation of events from Plath's "real" life. . . . "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is very much about this world, and the shared hazards of living in it. These hazards are at once psychic, social and physical: a literal and metaphoric poison that circulates between the human beings who live in post-industrial capitalist culture, and pay a high price for the privilege of technology and convenience. . . . These are the dreams of people with no access to what we might term the natural world—that is to say, to wildlife, unpolluted air, the countryside and indigenous plants and flowers. (93, 94-95)

For Robin Peel also, it is this type of culture to which Plath writes, attempting to expose its hypocrisy. When placed alongside the loss of the human conscience and consciousness, the advantages of a technologically elite society lose value; the importance and prestige of materialism become just an appearance of reality, masking the truth that Johnny Panic's dreams signify.

This concern with the human separation from the natural world and the damage inflicted on the human consciousness by technology connects Plath's short story to Lawrence's Rainbow, particularly when he depicts the colliery as a destructive, dehumanizing workplace. Lawrence criticizes the human infatuation for the "abstract,"

which he embodies in the "machine;" and the lovers of the abstract, Tom Brangwen, the manager of the colliery, and Winifred Inger, his fiancée, Lawrence describes as detached from humanity. The "machine" allows them to escape the reality of their emotions (Lawrence 338). For Plath, the mental institution is the machine; its cohorts, the doctors, who in serving it escape the reality of the emotional world, provide other humans—the patients—with psychological bandages that pacify the psyche by persuading it to calmly accept and integrate the physical effects of dehumanization.

The protagonist of the short story also has a dream. She dreams of a giant lake, which holds all dreams ever dreamed. The dreams seem to contaminate this lake for they never go anywhere; they just sit and stew in their own decay. The watery image that Plath uses recalls Woolf's image for the female imagination in "Professions for Women." Like the female writer whom Woolf describes, Plath's protagonist fishes into the deep realms of her unconscious, and the images that surface, although grotesque, embody the fears of our culture's collective consciousness. Woolf's dreamer is awakened when she senses the patriarchal institution imposing limitations. Plath's dreamer, however, does not stop. She dreams of grotesque destruction, of mutilated bodies, and of a primitive existence, when dreams of technological destruction would have no bearing on reality. Indeed, this dreamer's dream would appall the "Angel in the House."

Plath's depiction of the dream illustrates the modern world's destruction of the imagination. Technology has overwhelmed humanity, and science has objectified the living process from its initiation—the embryo in the womb—to its death—the body in the grave. Consequently, theorems and proofs have replaced the mystery of existence, and this has led to an interminable fear of human meaninglessness, for if the human

consciousness is no more than a body of scientific evidence, then scientific advancement can easily replace it. Imagination is proven inert, unless used in cooperation with the corporate world. Within this framework, only the nullification of imagination and the delusion of comfort create communities:

> I've a dream of my own. My one dream. A dream of dreams.
>
> In this dream there's a great half-transparent lake stretching away in every direction, too big for me to see the shores of it, if there are any shores, and I'm hanging over it, looking down from the glass belly of some helicopter. At the bottom of the lake—so deep I can only guess at the dark masses moving and heaving—are the real dragons. The ones that were around before men started living in caves and cooking meat over fires and figuring out the wheel and the alphabet. Dream about these long enough and your feet and hands shrivel away when you look at them too closely. The sun shrinks to the size of an orange, only chillier, and you've been living in Roxbury since the last ice age. No place for you but a room padded soft as the first room you knew of, where you can dream and float, float and dream, till at last you actually are back among those great originals and there's no point in any dreams at all.
>
> It's into this lake people's minds run at night, brooks and gutter trickles to one borderless common reservoir. It bears no resemblance to those pure sparkling-blue sources of drinking water the suburbs guard more jealously than the Hope diamond in the middle of pine woods and barbed fence. It's the sewage farm of the ages, transparence aside.
>
> Now the water in this lake naturally stinks and smokes from what dreams have

been left sogging around in it over the centuries. . . .

I . . . see the surface of the lake swarming with snakes, dead bodies puffed as blowfish, human embryos bobbing around in laboratory bottles like so many unfinished messages from the great I Am. I see whole storehouses of hardware: knives, paper cutters, pistons and cogs and nutcrackers; the shiny fronts of cars looming up, glass-eyed and evil-toothed. . . .

One of the most frequent shapes in this backwash is so commonplace it seems silly to mention it. It's a grain of dirt. The water is thick with these grains. They seep in among everything else and revolve under some queer power of their own, opaque, ubiquitous. Call the water what you will, Lake Nightmare, Bog of Madness, it's here the sleeping people lie and toss together among the props of their worst dreams, one great brotherhood, though each of them, waking, thinks himself singular, utterly apart. (154-155)

The protagonist's dream moves in a historically chronological order, like evolution. Layers form the lake. At the bottom are the dreams that existed before technology, the ones that she senses but cannot describe definitively. She calls them "the real dragons," reminiscent of modernism's primitivism. The "real dragons" existed before men began to technologically evolve and before they began to organize and represent their world through language. Dreaming about the "real dragons" leads one backward, into a boundless imaginative space, and the "room padded soft as the first room you knew of" symbolizes the womb, an uncontaminated place, where "there's no point in any dreams" because there is nothing to fear, no technology or capitalistic competition. In the womb,

one is connected to the roots of the natural world; thus, one's imagination contains boundless potential.

As the protagonist continues, the lakes description is indicative of our twentieth-century culture. The dead float around, implying that life has lost value and that humans have become expendable. Science has converted birth into a technical process. Embryos are simply objects to be stored and studied. And the dirt that emanates throughout the lake implicates toxicity and pollution into both the physical and imaginative places of our lives. Plath juxtaposes human life, mechanical parts, and the eroding environment to expose our dehumanized and desensitized consciousnesses as the true reality of our culture.

Despite the uselessness of the dreams in the lake, they do at least represent a community, unlike the detached and lonely society where people seek human help at mental clinics, such as the man who dreams of a cotton mill, whose "not alone, although he thinks he is" (154). This lake is a "brotherhood" of anxiety perpetuated by the false hope of the industrial world. Fear allows the dreamers to perceive the great lie of their livelihood: they are the living dead, cut off from community and imaginatively amputated. Knowing the lie, however, makes the dreamers fear their dreams even more than the reality that spawns them.

The protagonist decides that her day job does not provide enough time to gather and record the dreams. She stays in the clinic overnight, hiding until everyone else has left, so she can study the dreams without detection. Her plan, however, fails. Miss Milleravage, the secretary of the "Observation Ward," where the doctors send the severer dreamers, captures her. The protagonist describes Miss Milleravage as unattractive, with

a muscular manly build, whose "face, hefty as a bullock's, is covered with a remarkable number of tiny maculae, as if she'd been lying under water for some time and little algae had latched on to her skin, smutching it over with tobacco browns and greens" (158). She has "whopping milkless breasts" (166). The protagonist wonders "if Miss Milleravage has ever seen the wholesome light of day," and she states, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she'd been brought up from the cradle with the sole benefit of artificial lighting" (158). Plath relegates Miss Milleravage to the patriarchal system of power and control. She is single, masculine, and an institutional authority.

Recalling Plath's depiction of marriage as a process of drowning, the image of Miss Milleravage symbolizes a similar wedlock. Miss Milleravage has married the machine; thus, her face looks as if "she'd been lying under water for some time." Miss Milleravage represents the patriarchal barrier with which Woolf's dreamer collides, forcing the dreamer to awaken from her trance and to close the valves of the female imagination. The replacing of humanistic values with those of the machine has stripped Miss Milleravage's body of its natural, creative potential, symbolized by her "whopping milkless breasts." Through her close relationship with the institution, Miss Milleravage has become patriarchal in her effort to control the imaginations of other humans and in her manlike appearance.

Miss Milleravage takes the protagonist to a room where electric shock treatments are conducted. Within the context of the story, Plath uses the shock treatments as a machine metaphor: the shock treatments function to condition and conform individuals, ridding them of their idiosyncratic imaginations—their dreams—just as the industrial society

conditions its peoples in order to conform them to the mechanical culture. The protagonist states:

> The box seems to be eyeing me, copperhead-ugly, from its coil of electric wires, the latest model in Johnny-Panic-Killers. . . .
>
> Then, from the four corners of the room and from the door behind me come five false priests in white surgical gowns and masks whose one lifework is to unseat Johnny Panic from his own throne. They extend me full-length on my back on the cot. The crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue. The masked priests move to their posts and take hold: one of my left leg, one of my right, one of my right arm, one of my left. One behind my head at the metal box where I can't see.
>
> From their cramped niches along the wall, the votaries raise their voices in protest. They begin the devotional chant:
>
> The only thing to love is fear itself.
>
> Love of Fear is the beginning of wisdom.
>
> The only thing to love is Fear itself.
>
> May Fear and Fear and Fear be everywhere
>
> There is no time for Miss Milleravage or the Clinic Director or the priests to muzzle them.
>
> The signal is given.
>
> The machine betrays them.
>
> At the moment when I think I am most lost the face of Johnny Panic appears in a nimbus of arc lights on the ceiling overhead. I am shaken like a leaf in the teeth

of glory. His beard is lightning. Lightning is in his eye. His Word charges and illumines the universe.

The air crackles with his blue-tongued lightning-haloed angels.

His love is the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart.

He forgets not his own. (166)

Not even shock treatment can obliterate Johnny Panic. Employing the modernist technique of the mythic method, Plath uses the crucifixion of Christ as a metaphorical image for our culture's destruction of the imagination. The image implies though, that just as Christ lives on through belief, the imagination cannot truly be extinguished.

In the depiction of the shock treatment, Plath evokes the Woolfian idea that the female body and imagination are integrally connected. The enforcers of the institutional culture must bind the protagonist's body in order to attempt the binding of her imagination. By coercing her body into submission, the doctors seek to subdue her mind into patriarchal compliance.

Although "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" imagises through metaphor and symbol the condition of our technological cultural, the story literally comments on the inadequacy of mental institutions to help individuals suffering from mental torment. The doctors' refusal to understand the causes for their patients' disturbing dreams and the unconventional behavior of the protagonist is the same type of refusal and lack of empathy that Woolf depicts in Mrs. Dalloway, when she describes the treatment that the doctors prescribe to Septimus.

Septimus struggles to contain an idea which, from his perspective, would destabilize the construction of social identity:

> [H]e, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last, after all the toils of civilization—Greeks, Roman, Shakespeare, Darwin, and now himself—was to be given whole to. . . . "To whom?" he asked aloud. "To the Prime Minister," the voice which rustled above his head replied. The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them, for ever. (101-102)

This "supreme secret" that Septimus envisions would somehow change the world, presumably because its exposure to the masses would force them to reconsider the construction of their identities and the scaffolding of nationalism. The secret would implicitly cause individuals to reconsider the social mandates of heterosexual relationships, which revolve around the spectacle of performance for the upkeep of public appearance. This performance opposes the "universal love" that Septimus senses as the natural condition of humanity.

Yet Septimus cannot reveal his secret because his idiosyncrasies have already deemed him as mentally unstable, and his doctors, instead of listening and even learning from the secret that Septimus has uncovered, prescribe "Proportion," what Septimus has lost his sense of (Woolf 146). Securing health and upholding the a husband's responsibilities—making a solid income, providing a home, giving one's wife children—insure a sense of "Proportion" (149-150). In "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," the doctors work

for "Proportion" for "health" and "happiness" ("JP" 153). The protagonist, like Septimus, threatens to unseat this ruling force, replacing it with Pan—Johnny Panic.

However, if Johnny Panic represents the catalyst for imaginative thought, what, in twentieth-century culture, has the imagination become? To accept his love is to accept the inevitability of death: "the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart," particularly death through suicide. Thus, to face the dreams of Johnny Panic is to face one's worst nightmare—the emptiness of life in a world of materialism and capitalism and the uselessness of love in this atmosphere of human annihilation. In his response to facing Johnny Panic, Septimus commits suicide. Yet this suicide, Mrs. Dalloway perceives as heroic:

> Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center, which mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.
>
> But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure?(Woolf 280-281)

In destroying the body, Septimus maintains the autonomy of his soul. The body, with its male anatomy, restricts Septimus from exposing the revelations of his imagination because "Proportion" blocks the truth of his conscience.

Loving fear has two possibilities: accepting our place as a cog in the capitalistic machine because we fear the punishment for not conforming or accepting the falsity of that existence and confronting the fear that restrains us from rebelling. By doing the latter, we can perhaps imagine different dreams not born from Johnny Panic, but born from hope. Plath's protagonist refuses to end her relationship with Johnny Panic;

because of this, the mental institution tortures her mind and body. Septimus also refuses to end his relationship with his dream that runs counter to social structure; thus, he dies, refusing to submit, refusing coercion. Septimus and the secretary show that opposing social structure perpetuates the empowerment of individual imaginations. And through this empowerment, one may liberate the imaginations of other individuals. If this liberation were not inevitable, then authorities of "Proportion" like Miss Milleravage and the Clinic Director would not actively seek to extinguish imaginative voices that threaten to expose the lies of an institutionalized culture.

As always, Plath's writing is paradoxical, ironic, and ambiguous. How can Johnny Panic be a constructive force, when the dreams he enables are horrific? Even the protagonist describes them as nightmares. Yet these nightmares illuminate the actuality of our existence. His nightmares allow us to identify the possibility of individual choice. If Johnny Panic's dreams tempt one toward suicide, then they have acted as a catalyst for personal choice. In this context, suicide becomes a form of cultural rebellion: the industrial society cannot steal one's identity, if one chooses to die by his or her own will.

Other than suicide, Johnny Panic perpetuates the possibility of imaginative awareness. By accepting his dreams, we can evaluate and deconstruct their causes. We can find alternatives to his nightmares by exercising our imaginations when we are awake, consequently learning to control the mind that Johnny Panic infiltrates at night. Yet to use the imagination during our waking hours, the institutional system of control must be debunked, which is what the protagonist attempts to do. She steps out of her position within the institutional system, and although her antagonists capture her, they do not eliminate her connection with Johnny Panic. Thus, she can continue her imaginative

exploration of herself and her society, despite the fact that by doing so, she endangers her own person. Plath's writing shows that taking individual risks is integral to enabling change, and to do this, one must act on his or her ideas and ideals, confronting threatening situations with courage and defying conformity even when complying with the powerful is the easiest and most popular choice.

Perceiving Plath in her Historical Moment; Envisioning Alternatives to its Vacuity

"Purdah," "Paralytic," "An Appearance," and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," all depict individuals who confront the actuality of their entrapped existences. Plath creates alternatives to these conditions: violence in "Purdah"; identifying with nature, an uncontained female form, in "Paralytic"; awareness and analysis of one's emotional, creative, and perceived selves in "An Appearance"; and personal endangerment for the sake of imaginative potential in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." These writings all contain definite cultural, consequently political undertones. Admittedly, we can relate each writing to Plath's life experience; however, if we suspend our knowledge of this experience, then we release her writings from preconceived understandings and allow them to exist in their own right, beyond Plath's personal biography. When we do this, we can treat her writings as cultural discourses that record the emotional impact that her historical moment had on not only herself, but also on the society around her.

Plath's writing reveals concerns connected to the modernists who came before her. The modernist tradition gives Plath alternatives from which she can aesthetically shape

her political and personal vision to fit the cultural anxieties of her time. In "Elm," vorticism and symbolic juxtaposition create a sense of tension that exists in the anticipation of a sudden release of energy such as a bomb exploding. In "Purdah," Plath uses the mythic method, giving authority to the history of Clytaemnestra, who violently murders her husband. Virginia Woolf's feminism and foregrounding of the female consciousness is apparent in the previous poems as well as in "Mothers," "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," and "An Appearance." Throughout these writings we see Plath's overwhelming concern with technology and industrialization as dehumanizing forces, an anti-materialist statement modeled by the modernist D. H. Lawrence in his novel The Rainbow. Above all, her writing exemplifies the heroics of the female imagination attempting to carve a space for itself within the male dominated literary cannon and in a culture undeniably shaped by patriarchal ambitions.

In a Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Pamela J. Annas discusses Plath's writing within its historical context and how this context complicates our understanding of Plath's writing process and the art that resulted:

> A major American poet writing in a period of literary transition from modernism to postmodernism, Sylvia Plath determinedly and fiercely wrote of and out of female experience and in the context of the time and place that shaped her—the mid 1950s to the early 1960s, in a post-World War II and prefeminist United States. Sylvia Plath is in many ways transitional. She wrote in . . . a time . . . when if a woman expected to have a career she had better plan to be a successful wife and mother as well. . . . Within the fifteen years after Plath's death, the United States moved into a period of social protest and increasing political consciousness, some though not

> all of it, concentrated around the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the women's movement. In response, American poetry became more explicitly political on the one hand and more concerned with narrating the poet's personal engagement with a real world. It becomes less ironic and detached, more engaged, committed, and subjective; it became a poetry of involvement as well as a poetry of experience. The changes in American consciousness that would make possible Denise Levertov's anti-war poems in the late 1960s and Adrienne Rich's feminist poems by the early 1970s were not available to Plath in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (11)

Annas implies that the 50s was a time of general cultural passivity. Today, when we think of American history, we think of the middle to late 60s as representative of cultural rebellion. In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf writes "that in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (320). Perhaps a change, corresponding to the type that Woolf perceived, was on the verge of occurring during Plath's historical moment of the late 50s and early 60s. The change, however, had not yet blossomed. Thus, Plath, despite the literary chronology that pinpoints the climax of modernism between 1910 and 1925 (Bell 9), uses this tradition in order to devise the expression of a human character seeking renewal and rebirth. She recycles the old, making a new, perhaps feminist modernism that shares the aesthetic and cultural concerns of its predecessor, but that expresses itself with even more vigor and irony and that primarily focuses on the female consciousness struggling to shape a voice from the remnants of sexist literary and cultural traditions.

What Annas points out is that Plath's writing cannot be contained by any one critical genre. It is indeed "transitional." Her irony, mythology, and ambiguity complicate the confessionality that her poetry and prose might reveal; thus, we can assume that she was not writing with a purely confessional intent. Encoded in her fragmented style of colliding images is the voice of political protest, which speaks for the women in Woolf's time, Plath's time, and our time. Yet because of her modernist technique, this voice is embedded and obscure, and the difficulty of piecing together its fragmented statements, which seem to occur at specific moments in time, not in a united chronology, causes critics to read her poems as confessional statements expressed during a personal moment of psychological breakdown. To do this is to demean Plath's talent, humanity, and heroism. Moreover, the attributing of Plath's poetry to the act of confession is a mere rearing of the "Angel in the House," who says that a sane woman would not speak of such grotesque issues—fragmented bodies, electric shock treatment, stabbing one's husband—and would not question the patriarchal social structure. Rather than acknowledging the highly aesthetic quality of Plath's writing, which in turn makes interpretations of her writing all the more difficult, critics would rather read her writing as an attempt to define her own hysterical self.

Irrefutably, Plath's writing generates ideas of political protest, individual awareness, and imaginative empowerment. It generates a questioning of the higher powers that shape our culture without overtly naming them as enemies to personal growth and transcendence. And if she suggests any single alternative to the modern "Waste Land" that Eliot describes, it would have to be love—self and communal—which surpasses any stock religion, definitive culture, or political tradition. In "Mothers," Esther's self-love

keeps her from conforming to a discriminatory group, while her love for others allows her to connect with those who are discriminated against. In "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," love for imaginative endeavor leads the protagonist to continue her creative plight even though her particular art has no usefulness in the consumer world. Belief in the imagination implies both love for the self and humanity, for the imagination is universal. In "Elm," "Purdah," "An Appearance," and "Paralytic" love, despite its painfulness, is pursued by the speakers. Yet in order for love to become a culturally realized alternative to the modern world's destruction, it must be placed within a political framework without becoming contaminated by this context.

However, even love as Plath represents it in her writing must be questioned and redefined continually. She demonstrates that the love between husband and wife, once placed within the mandates of our culture, suffers from contamination. In its impurity, love loses its power as an alternative to human hopelessness. In addition, self-love too, as demonstrated in "Purdah" and "An Appearance," becomes deformed by a culture in which humans learn to perceive themselves as objects. Plath's writing analyzes the divisions of love—the forms it assumes and the consequences of these forms in action.

Yet what pure types of love remain when our world works to conform and objectify its peoples, corrupting emotion by amputating the conscience from the feeling human? How can love exist in our desensitized culture? Plath searches for these answers, and as she continues to analyze and test love in differing contexts, her poems revisit self and heterosexual relationships, redefining love's manifestations when the individuals involved have undergone cultural contamination—conformism, objectification, and politicized subjugation—and her poems image new relationships, specifically that of

mother and infant, when at least one of the participating parties has not yet experienced cultural conditioning.

Chapter 3

Recovering from the "Waste Land":

Plath's Path toward Humanity's Redemption

We have seen Plath condense cultural and political issues into personally and socially relevant contexts when she responds to patriarchal oppression ("Purdah"), dehumanization ("Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"), and environmental pollution ("Elm") in her poetry and prose. This bringing of outer realities into the realm of individual consciousness is a modernist technique that Eliot exemplifies in The Waste Land and that Woolf models in Mrs. Dalloway. Both of Plath's predecessors use cultural circumstances to shape the psychological and physical conditions of the individuals in their works. Like The Waste Land and Mrs. Dalloway, Plath's writings reveal the failure of emotional connection between two individuals in heterosexual relationships.

Throughout Ariel, Plath continues to investigate the relationships between self and world, and she further critiques the ways in which contemporary society limits the possibilities of love between male and female ("The Applicant") and distorts the possibility of loving oneself ("Lady Lazarus"). These poems show that in a climate of Cold War fear, commercialization, and industrialization, love becomes a symptom of a diseased American consciousness.

In examining different forms of love, Plath writes of the love between mother and infant in the poems "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Child." This examination is an anxious one, for the personae in these poems perceive the world in terms of brutality. How can a mother, in good conscience, bring a child into a world that threatens individuality, self-worth, and life itself? In these poems, the mother acts as protector,

attempting to safeguard the child from her own knowledge. As long as the child remains innocent of the violent outside forces, then the love between mother and infant remains pure. Pamela J. Annas explains, "For Plath, the one potentially uncorrupted and wholly positive love seems to be that between herself and her children, for at least in that relationship one person's perception is as yet unspoiled by a knowledge of the world it must live in" (115). These poems envision a celebratory peacefulness between mother and child, yet the poems image a growing anxiety within the mother as she senses destructive forces crowding the threshold of the mother / child sanctuary.

In a letter to her mother, Aurelia Plath, dated December 7, 1961, Sylvia Plath talks about her perception of the political issues of her time and how these issues relate to her own experience as a mother:

> . . . I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of *The Nation*—"Juggernaut, the Warfare State"—all about the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America and the forces of the John Birch society, etc.; and then another article about the repulsive shelter craze for fallout, all very factual, documented, and true, that I simply couldn't sleep for nights with all the warlike talk in the papers, such as Kennedy saying Khrushchev would "have no place to hide," and the armed forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the "inevitable" war with our "implacable foe" . . . I began to wonder if there was any point in trying to bring up children in such a mad, self-destructive world. The sad thing is that the power for destruction is real and universal . . . One of the most distressing features about all this is the public announcements of Americans arming against each other—the citizens of Nevada announcing they will turn out bombed

> and ill people from Los Angeles into the desert . . . and ministers and priests preaching that it is all right to shoot neighbors who try to come into one's bomb shelters. . . . Anyway, I think it appalling that the shelter system in America should be allowed to fall into the hands of the advertisers—the more money you spend, the likelier you are to survive, etc., when 59% of taxes go to military spending already. (LH 437-438)

This letter illustrates Plath's awareness of the contemporary political atmosphere in which capitalism, commercialism, and human survival are intricately linked. Plath indicts our political leaders for persuading Americans to feel hatred and prejudice toward the foreign "other," and she accuses Christian authorities of enforcing these attitudes not only toward the feared foreigners, but also toward fellow Americans. It is such a world, where individuality asserts itself in terms of violence, where self-reliance means the sacrificing of love and charity, and where money is the catalyst for both war and personal safety, that Plath fears her children will become victims of. It is such a world from which she hopes her love can protect them, if only temporarily.

Constructing Creation among the Dead:

Love's Imitation in "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices"

The poem "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices," dated March, 1962 (CP 176-187), precedes Plath's Ariel poems that focus on the relationship between mother and child and between self and society. The poem also explores the dilemma of a woman seeking self-definition—an identity that enables self-love—in a culture traditionally hostile toward women. This poem images the kind of world which the mother persona

of the later poems desires to safeguard her children from and depicts a woman—the Second Voice—similar to the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" who experiences repeated rebirths. "Three Women" also represents the commercialized society that leads to the depersonalized male / female relationship that Plath images in "The Applicant."

In "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices," Plath writes of three women in a maternity ward. The First Voice recites the thoughts of a mother who gives birth to a healthy baby. The Second Voice, a secretary, tells her thoughts as she experiences one of many miscarriages, and the Third Voice, a college student, describes her reactions to giving up her child for adoption. The Second Voice talks of a dehumanized and polluted environment, and she accuses a patriarchal culture of responsibility for the diseased condition of the world. It is this voice that critics have described as the voice of the later Ariel poems (Annas 87). In the following lines, the woman blames our culture's love of the lifeless—machines, war, death itself—for her miscarriage:

> When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
> I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
> There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
> Endlessly proceed—and the cold angels, the abstractions. . . .
> . . . The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed
> From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,
>
> Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.

I am dying as I sit. . . .

This is a disease I carry home, this is a death.

Again, this is a death. Is it the air,

Particles of destruction I suck up? Am I a pulse

That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel?

Is this my lover then? This death, this death, this death?

. . . Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death? (lines 15-20, 27-30, 36-40, 42)

First, the voice distinguishes between flatness and roundness. Flatness, the woman attributes to men who have historically been the leaders of culture, advancing it in the names of science and industrialization. She views the men's devotion to ideas, to the abstract notion of progress, as a love of death, for an idea is indeed lifeless, and it is the advancement of one's particular beliefs which leads to wars, "destructions," and "guillotines," all of which flatten life, whether of human or of nature. Their love of the abstract echoes Lawrence's negative portrayal of Tom Brangwen and Winifred Inger in The Rainbow. In "Three Women," men, who give birth to ideas, contrast with women, who give birth to actual life, to new human beings.

The Second Voice attributes roundness to females. Literally, women are round because of pregnancy; metaphorically they are round because they support, nourish, and deliver true life. In both senses—physical and metaphorical—women correspond to the shape and the function of the earth. However, the secretary working in close contact with the flat men has, according to Annas, "caught . . . some quality like cardboard which

symbolically and really causes in some way her recurrent miscarriages" (87). Plath's depiction of pregnancy, miscarriage, and the female body recalls Woolf's interest in discovering a language for the body. Plath's writing of the female body is a literary and feminist attempt to give value to female experience, a significance that has historically been reserved for male experience in connection to the male mind. In "Three Women," the male mind and female body are juxtaposed against each other. This juxtaposition leads to a threatening competition that will inevitably perpetuate destruction.

Working in an environment typified by machinery, the Second Voice orders "parts, bits, cogs." Like the men, she supports the lifeless and unintentionally conspires with death. Furthermore, this woman, like the woman in "An Appearance," has become an appendage of the workplace machinery. Contemplating her environment, the Second Voice asks, "Is it the air, / The particles of destruction I suck up?" This question implies two dimensions: Has the flatness of the environment corrupted her spirit, disabling it from envisioning life or has environmental pollution caused her miscarriage by literally contaminating her body? In lines twenty-four through twenty-six, she states: "I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation. / I could not believe it. Is it so difficult / For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?" Her comments connect barren nature with the condition of her spirit and echo the poems "Paralytic" and "Elm" in which environmental pollution endangers both the spiritual and physical health of the speakers.

In lines sixty-five and eighty-two through ninety-one, the Second Voice perceives the faces of her dead children, but "The faces have no features." She sees other faces as well:

. . . The faces of nations,

Governments, parliaments, societies,

The faceless faces of important men.

It is these men I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not flat!

They are jealous gods

That would have the whole world flat because they are.

I see the Father conversing with the Son.

Such flatness cannot but be holy.

"Let us make a heaven," they say.

"Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls."

The woman has assimilated to the male centered environment. By saying that she "minds" them, the Second Voice implies that she follows their orders; yet her attitude toward her obedience is ambivalent, for it is their insistence on flatness which has led to her spiritual barrenness and failed pregnancies. Annas explains that the woman's "inability to be a 'normal' woman is directly related to the flatness of the male world she lives in and has to some extent accepted. She is an integer in it, an integral part of it. She has partaken of their flatness. She is like them" (88).

Although the Second Voice obeys the men, she also minds minding them. Her voice is ironic; she mocks their arrogant attitude of holiness. By using the Christian image of the Father and Son, Plath notes that the holy doctrine contains a discrepancy. Where are the women in this formula? In Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning, Christina Britzolakis explains that at this point in the poem

> the Second Voice sets up a protofeminst opposition between the nurturing values of the reproductive female body and the Enlightenment narrative of "progress" as technological mastery over nature . . . It is the repression of the corporeal nature of maternity that enables the myth of creation through the divine Father's Word. His patriarchal "jealousy" of the life-giving generative female body undermines his claims to an omniscient, pure knowledge. (177)

Yet, despite the second woman's insight into the hypocrisy of the patriarchy, she has relied on its functioning for her identity. She is the secretary of an industry that revolves around male leadership and decision-making. Moreover, because of her own failures in birthing life, she, like the male gods, is jealous of the "life-giving generative female body."

The second woman recognizes her own hypocrisy, her own jealousy, and as revealed in lines 148-152, these emotions lead to self-hatred:

> I am accused. I dream of massacres.
>
> I am a garden of black and red agonies.
>
> I drink them,
>
> Hating myself, hating and fearing. And now the world conceives
>
> Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love.
>
> It is a love of death that sickens everything.

The woman accuses herself. She implicates herself in the violence of humankind. Instead of her female body giving life, it gives pain, "black and red agonies," and these forms of painfulness nourish her masochistically. This masochism, she links to the earth itself, which grants life only to find nourishment in death: "I lose life after life. The dark

earth drinks them. / She is the vampire of us all" (154-155). Thus, the earth lives from death.

The woman further links herself to the earth by envisioning vengeance on the men she has obeyed. Like the earth, she too is a vampire:

> I know her intimately—
>
> Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
>
> Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
>
> Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end. (158-161)

By connecting herself to the earth, the woman realizes a legitimate possibility of rebirth: just as the earth regenerates itself continually, she can do the same. The Second Voice can experience rebirth, like a vampire, like the earth itself, by eating—killing—the men who have "used her meanly." Yet to do so, her former self must die: "I die. I make a death. / . . . I too create corpses" (162, 190). The old self, however, the woman refuses to relinquish.

The poem ends in the season of spring. Earlier the woman has felt only winter: "How winter fills my soul" (178). But time has passed. The earth has renewed itself; consequently, the woman is also restored, though not reborn. She has recovered from her visions of violence, death, and vengeance. She has regained her sense of "Proportion." She reclaims an identity, not as a creator of corpses but as a married woman, and she perceives the earth in terms of its ability to nourish not to kill: "I am a wife. / The city waits and aches. The little grasses / Crack through stone, and they are green with life" (371-373).

Still, to name her identity as "wife" implies ambivalence, for she has already indicted the patriarchy as a destructive force. The word "wife" connotes subservience to a male dominated institution, just as the word secretary does. Only once in her monologue does the woman mention love in relation to her husband, and this occurs when she reenters society in her old role as secretary and wife:

> The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity. . . .
>
> I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.
>
> I draw on the old mouth.
>
> The red mouth I put by with my identity. . . .
>
> I do not even need a holiday; I can go to work today.
>
> I can love my husband, who will understand.
>
> Who will love me through the blur of my deformity
>
> As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue. (242, 246-248, 250-253)

Loving her husband occurs only when the woman's socially constructed identity is in tact. She reenters her social role, unchanged. Describing herself as a "statistic" reinforces the idea that society, in particular the patriarchy, has formed her. She too is one of their abstractions. Her nonhuman status as a statistic makes possible her husband's love. Previously, the woman has described the patriarchy as "jealous gods," who resent women for their creating potential. Thus, the husband, as a patriarchal representative, will feel pity, rather than jealousy, for his deformed wife who cannot create. This pity, the Second Voice confuses with love, for the former resembles the latter in its ability to engender kindness and acceptance.

The Second Voice may not be capable of giving birth, but she is capable of self-restoration, within the confines of patriarchal definition. Unlike the earth, whose destruction begets creation, this woman's renewal will only beget further destruction either in the form of miscarriages or by her continued participation in the industrial bureaucracy. Because the earth functions independently of the human world and its social constructions, the earth's identity rests solely on its creative potential. The Second Voice, though, remains fettered to the cultural regulations on which she relies to inform her identity, and if she were to give birth, then the child, like his or her mother, would continue the pattern of destruction.

The Second Voice re-envisions the secretary in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." However, the dream collector's existence relies on the imagination for identity. Although she works for an institution that preaches conformity in order to maintain the corporate machine, her secretary status is only a performance. Her true allegiance lies with the dreams—imaginative creations that counter social constructions of identity. These creations name a truth that contradicts the truth that culture claims. The former asserts that the imagination has the potential to create beauty for beauty's sake, but in order for beauty to be culturally realized, then social structures, built from the producer / consumer relationship that enslaves bodies and minds for the sake of its functioning, must be overthrown by the dreams that indicate the reality of our dehumanized existences.

The Second Voice, without freeing herself from cultural mandates, will remain a statistic—a breeder of corpses. She represses the visions of rebellion that visit her after her miscarriage. These visions, if acted on, would demand that she re-construct her

identity and her relationship with society. She refuses to act. By naming herself as wife, the woman concedes her identity's potential. She accepts the self limited within a patriarchal context, which the she has named as "flat"—static. This context also limits the possibilities of love, for history provides evidence that a love of death—"ideas, destructions, guillotines, abstractions, and black and red agonies"—exists more powerfully and persuasively than a love of life and beauty.

Mirrors of Reality: Poems of Disintegration and Detachment

Plath constructs another version of the Second Voice in the persona of "Lady Lazarus," dated November 6, 1962, and Plath again critiques the society that breeds destruction and false love in the poem "The Applicant," dated October 11, 1962. In both Ariel poems, Plath evokes what Annas describes as "a painfully acute sense of the depersonalization and fragmentation of 1950s America [that] is characteristic of the late poems" (104). "Lady Lazarus" depicts a woman who is reborn repeatedly into "The same place, the same face" the same dehumanized world. "The Applicant" presents a prospective marriage where humans are commercialized objects. Annas describes the marriage in the poem as representing "not only male/female relations but human relations in general. . . . Somehow all interaction between people, and especially that between men and women, given the history of the use of women as items of barter, is conditioned by the ethics and assumptions of a bureaucratized market place" (104).

Both poems describe human bodies in fragments, not as whole beings. "Lady Lazarus" states:

. . . my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

a paperweight,

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen. (lines 4-9)

The speaker of "The Applicant" describes humans according to artificial appendages, as if their body parts have literally assimilated to a mechanized environment:

First are you our sort of person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breast or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? (lines 1-6)

In both poems we see humans depicted in relation to their environments. Lady Lazarus, who has been reborn throughout history, has accumulated the evidence of human genocide. Her body now represents the victimization of a whole culture—the Jewish people who were massacred in World War II. The body the speaker describes in "The Applicant" has also undergone mutilation of some sort. Artificial appendages replace natural limbs and other body parts. By asking this initial question, the speaker implies that marriage, the contracted union of love, takes place only when one of the parties is somehow deformed. In this situation, love perhaps becomes pity, just as it did in "Three

Women," when the Second Voice states: "He will love me through the blur of my deformity / As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue." In both cases love exists to fill a culturally induced void unrelated to the true character or integrity of either individual.

The speakers of "Lady Lazarus" and "The Applicant" both speak to a dehumanized audience, where love and understanding have no place to develop. In "The Applicant," the salesman searches for an emptiness in the prospective buyer that his product can fill. When the speaker realizes that the man to whom he speaks has no artificial appendages or physical wounds, he asks, "Then / How can we give you a thing?" (7). Next, the salesman develops a rhetoric that will appeal to the man's everyday needs of living. The merchant's merchandise will comfort the man in pain, serve him according to his desires, and accompany him throughout the most mundane activities of a monotonous existence:

> Open your hand.
>
> Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
>
> To fill it and willing
>
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
>
> And do whatever you tell it.
>
> Will you marry it?
>
> It is guaranteed
>
> To thumb shut your eyes at the end
>
> And dissolve of sorrow. (9-17)

The female merchandise will even mourn the man's death until she herself dies of sadness, of pity for her husband and herself. She exists only in relation to her husband's existence. She can not only "sew" and "cook," but she can also "talk, talk, talk" (34-35).

She can both serve and entertain him. She will nourish him, clothe him, and keep him from boredom.

In "The Applicant," Plath employs the rhetoric of an industrial assembly line as a metaphor for the creation of relationships between men and women. The poem implies that in this culture, at this particular time, love is unavailable because it is restricted by the language of politics and social stereotypes that delineate the power structure of marriage. An assembly line efficiently creates social objects that sell because their functions fill a public void. Likewise, the prospective relationship of "The Applicant" is based on the efficiency of the woman to fill a lack in the man: "It works, there is nothing wrong with it. / You have a hole, it's a poultice. / You have an eye, it's an image" (36-38). Her assembly guarantees foolproof functioning.

Furthermore, Plath makes clear the causes for the condition of this loveless relationship: violence and fear. The salesman speaks to a victimized male audience. Their limbs are missing, and their emotions have been flattened. The merchant not only offers a female doll to the man, but he also sells a form of masculine identity—one that does not fear, one that protects the individual from violence:

> I notice you are stark naked.
>
> How about this suit—
>
> Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
>
> Will you marry it?
>
> It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
>
> Against fire and bombs through the roof. (19-24)

A suit for a man implies social propriety in the corporate world. Just as the Second Voice in "Three Women" reclaims her identity by putting on her lipstick and the clothes that she wore to work, the suit will give the man a socially acceptable character. In addition, the suit will protect the man from any type of violence which might threaten him. Specifically, the violence that Plath implies is that of nuclear war (Peel 191). This suit defends the body from the forces that result in human deformity; not even a nuclear bomb can subdue the fortitude of the corporate suit.

"The Applicant" and "Lady Lazarus" share the theme of nuclear annihilation. Both focus on body parts or the absence of them. Robin Peel attributes at least a portion of this thematic preoccupation to the Cold War:

> This was a Cold War period in which the potential for intercontinental nuclear war was rarely absent from the news. One thing that characterizes these poems is the obsession with deformity and the recurring images of flaking, peeling and bleeding, suggesting the horror of the loss of skin and mutation that is associated with the effects of radiation and nuclear bombs or male control. (191)

Lady Lazarus presents herself—her deteriorating body—as a form of grotesque entertainment to a curious, unabashed gathering of people:

> The peanut-crunching crowd
>
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot—
>
> The big strip tease.
>
> . . . Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well. (26-29, 43-45)

She is a living death, and loving death the Second Voice of "Three Women" has already described as characteristic of our culture. Lady Lazarus uses this knowledge to her advantage. She calls her death an "art," but she qualifies art by relating it to "everything else." In this culture, everything has become mundane, even art, even death, and by telling her crowd that her performance is "like everything else," she implies that they have no reason to fear her. By focusing on the body in a grotesque form and using its morbidity to attract an audience, Plath questions standards of beauty—a modernist preoccupation (Levinson 3). At the same time, however, she satirizes this questioning because her audience, instead of being startled or morally offended, finds a sense of satisfaction in Lady Lazarus's appearance.

The performer's body does not sadden the crowd or incite their consciences to question the consequences of war. They fail to recognize the history Lady Lazarus represents and that her deaths and rebirths—an unending cycle—result from previous wars and genocides, as well as their future inevitability. The Nazi Holocaust of the Jewish people, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, and the contemporary possibility of Cold War annihilation are all suggested by the poem's images. Robin Peel finds evidence of the Japanese World War II reference in a line, reading "I may be Japanese," that Al Alvarez influenced Plath to omit from the poem (192). Allusions to the Holocaust are apparent throughout the poem, such as in lines four through nine, when the speaker describes her body parts in relation to German—Nazi and

Jewish—relics, and the poem implies Cold War fear by the images of decaying body parts, fires, and death which can all be related to nuclear warfare.

Lady Lazarus continues to include Nazi references in her performance, but she complicates them by applying the German title for man—"Herr"—to both German and non-German males. Thus, she suggests that the mindset which induced the concentration camp massacres is the mentality that fuels the success of global powers like America. By speaking to her general audience, they too become implicated in the speaker's indictment and warning:

> So, so, Herr Doktor.
>
> So, Herr Enemy.
>
> I am your opus,
>
> I am your valuable,
>
> The pure gold baby
>
> That melts to a shriek.
>
> I turn and burn.
>
> Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
>
> Ash, ash—
>
> You poke and stir.
>
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A Gold Filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware. (65-81)

The images evoke World War II history—the ovens of the Nazi concentration camps and the oven like conditions induced by the atomic bombs that destroyed the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Peel 193). In both events, human lives—men, women, and children—and relationships were reduced to ash. What remains from these lives are the objects that only give evidence of existence, objects that can be used for barter by the powerful, the ones who have done the killing. Moreover, Lady Lazarus invites these powers to kill her by advertising her value to them. She implies that she is more valuable to them dead than alive. Through her death, they can redeem the monetary objects that are left of her—"A wedding ring, / A gold filling."

Now that Lady Lazarus has used her awareness of the audience's gross curiosity to draw them into her performance, she has manipulated them to the point where she can avenge both the victimized peoples of history and herself. Yet in all fairness to Lady Lazarus, she does warn her audience. She has already told them that "There is a charge" (57) for her performance, and she clearly states that they should fear her when she says, "Beware / Beware." Still, her audience seems more interested in her show, than in the truth that her performance suggests. Thus, she names what their curiosity will cost them:

"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (82-84). Her price is the lives of the patriarchy. Such was the prophecy of the Second Voice in "Three Women," when she connected herself to the earth: "Men have used her meanly. She will eat them."

Plath's poem combines cultures and histories, disturbing a chronological order of time and questioning the foundations of civilization. Exemplifying the mythic method, Plath incorporates the story of the Phoenix. Mythically, she combines the Biblical allusion to Lazarus, who rises from the dead, and a Buddhist allusion to repeated rebirths, caught in a cycle of craving and desire. The desire to punish the perpetrators of humanity's oppression ensures the repetition of her painful cycle. Whether she hopes to escape the cycle seems questionable, for the poem revolves around Lady Lazarus's interest in the material body and her desire to discover a way to release this body from torment. Paradoxically, asceticism, focusing on the enlightenment of the mind, would perpetuate release, but this would entail Lady Lazarus's withdrawal from society. This she refuses to do, for removing herself from culture would destroy her social objective, which is the seeking of justice for the peoples whom she perceives as victims.

Lady Lazarus chooses death and rebirth over spiritual release. Those individuals who partake in the violence that she describes and those who are attracted to the murderous examples of history must pay, and Lady Lazarus names her charge. She has articulated the rules of her performance; such details mean that she has made definitive choices. At some point, she has decided to use her own identity to express the suffering of humanity and to avenge that suffering by reversing the roles of victimized and victimizer, but to do so, she must die.

Choosing suicide implies that she loves humanity. Love for herself—her vision and voice—and her world allows her to sacrifice her personal identity for the sake of the suffering as well as those who have perpetuated violence, and, through rebirth, she can repeat her message timelessly. By removing the patriarchy from its omnipotent power, by eating men, Lady Lazarus ensures security for the future. After all, history has shown irrevocable violence, and the only way to keep such history from repeating itself is to remove the historical leaders—the patriarchy—from power.

"Lady Lazarus" is not the only poem in which Plath employs a speaker who identifies specifically with Jewish victimization. In "Daddy" another Ariel poem, the speaker claims, "I think I may well be a Jew" (35). Like Lady Lazarus, the speaker of "Daddy" indicts the patriarchy for personal and common suffering, and the speaker resolves to end victimization by refusing the patriarchy the opportunity to define her identity any longer: "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (80). In both poems the message is the same: if love is to exist and violence to expire, then our traditional male authorities, or more specifically, the types of intellectual rationality that such leaders have conditioned us to practice must be overthrown.

Yet some critics see Plath's literary use of the Holocaust, in particular, as a misappropriation of history because Plath links her own identity to the unimaginable anguish of the Jews during the Nazi reign in Germany. However, such a reading finds evidence only when we interpret Plath's writing as confessional. In the essay "The Death Throes of Romanticism" by Joyce Carol Oates, the author describes Plath's identification with the Jews as an act of selfishness, not as an attempt to inform or warn her audience about the dangers of dehumanization and about our own participation in a continuing

cultural violence. Oates writes, ". . . Plath exhibits only the most remote (and rhetorical) sympathy with other people. If she tells us she may be a bit of a 'Jew,' it is only to define herself, her sorrows, and not to involve our sympathies for the Jews of recent European history" (209). To say that Plath, herself, is detached from these emotions is to evaluate the poet, not the poems—to focus on her biography, not her poetic method.

Indeed, the speakers of Plath's poems are detached from emotional pain because Plath writes from a modernist influence. In fact, Britzolakis states

> Although Plath's 'confessional' tropes are often seen in terms of a Romantic parable of victimization, whether of the sensitive poetic individual crushed by a brutally rationalized society, or of feminist protest against a monolithic patriarchal oppressor, her self-reflexivity tends to turn confession into a parody gesture or a premise for theatrical performance. (151)

Britzolakis goes on to read "Lady Lazarus" as an "echo and parody" of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot (152). The difference, however, is that Prufrock sees himself as a victim of female sexuality, while Lady Lazarus uses her sexuality to act out the feminine myths which Prufrock both fears and is tantalized by. After all, Lady Lazarus does perform a strip-tease, a sexually erotic dance in order to lure her audience into a destructive trap.

Yet what her stripping reveals is not the mythologized female body, but layers of a murderous history. And her audience, although curious, is not empathetic or mournful. Rather, the audience is a desensitized product of a commercialized culture. Thus, the detached voice of "Lady Lazarus" mockingly incarnates our culture's collective voice—an advertisement rhetoric that sells the soul (153). Although Plath writes of violent

vengeance on the individuals who have led our culture into its current dehumanized condition, this too parodies the violence which these oppressors have employed. Plath leaves us dangling, giving us no definitive resolutions. "Lady Lazarus" like most of Plath's writing, is a cultural mirror, forcing us to look at our reflections, to identify our faults, and if we accept the truth we see, to find an imaginative means released from history, through which we instigate individual, social, and political changes.

Changing the Language of Love:

Images for Childhood in "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Child"

The modernist world that Plath depicts in her writing resembles the decrepit and decaying culture that T. S. Eliot represents in The Waste Land, where emotional connections between a man and a woman never seem to materialize. Individuals, defined by their employment, "the typist" or "a small house agent's clerk," are spiritually imprisoned (Eliot lines 222, 232). Their bodies function within this imprisonment, but their emotions are dulled, flattened. In "What the Thunder Said," Eliot cites the Brihadaranyaka, an ancient Hindu text, as a source for human salvation (Eliot 2159). One must practice "Datta" (giving), "Dayadhvam" (sympathy), and "Damyata" (control) (Eliot lines 403, 413, 419). Integrating, compassion, selflessness, and self-control into one's life will release one from isolation and will foster the development of love and understanding between individuals. These emotional practices that the thunder speaks will allow a human to transcend the materialism that defines the modern world and reach a plane of spiritual connection that creates a community, despite the dehumanizing violence of reality.

In Plath's poems that focus on her children, the thunder's teachings replace the violence and anger typified in other poems. Compassion, sympathy, and self-control are integral to Plath's conception of motherhood. Whereas in "Lady Lazarus," while the speaker feels compassion and sympathy for historical victims, her resolution to seek punishment and further violence to avenge these victims shows that she lacks self-control and that her empathetic feelings are misdirected into anger and hostility. Perceiving the world in terms of oppression and brutality like Lady Lazarus would influence a woman to revolt against the notion of childbirth, for a woman would force a child to exist in a pre-constructed reality, detached completely from positive forms of emotion, imagination, and self-realization. Moreover, not only would external representations of reality and history shape the child, but also the mother's own sense of impending destruction would morph the child's perspective of life into a meaningless struggle.

The choice of childbirth haunts Plath, for she recognizes that omnipotent forces of history shape culture. During the early sixties, when she wrote "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Child," Plath knew of the possibility of nuclear war perpetuated by Cold War tension. Robin Peel writes that "[t]he recent period of sustained international tension, from the Russian and American tank confrontation across the Berlin divide in October 1961 to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, had produced a prolonged period of anxiety, and the daily possibility of nuclear exchange seemed, and was, very real" (25). This Cold War anxiety coupled with the atrocities of World War II makes the possibility of love seem remote if not impossible. In the case of childbirth, a mother can love her child easily enough, but bringing a child into a continually hostile and self-destructive world threatens the value and complicates the purpose of this love.

In order to combat the forces of hostility that surround life and that humans have internalized, a mother must invoke positive emotions—compassion, giving, and self-control—to secure the humanity of her own children. Personally, Plath perceived her children as a gift to the future of the world. Robin Peel cites a comment Plath made to Lynne Lawner in a letter dated September 3, 1960, now located in the Lily Library in Bloomington Indiana. Plath writes of her daughter: "Frieda is my answer to the H-bomb" (Peel 60). This statement empowers the choice of childbirth, giving it political and humanitarian relevance. The positive emotions—love, nourishment, responsibility to life—involved in the physical act of creation bring a peaceful alternative to the violent choices of our political leaders and to the choice made by Lady Lazarus and the speaker of "Purdah." Elaborating on Plath's statement, Peel writes: "[s]he was suggesting that an action of human creation was her individual, and individualized, response to those who threatened the world with nuclear destruction and an answer to those whose sense of despair about the future advised against bringing any children into the world" (60). Thus, by emanating the humanitarian, life-giving attitude that a mother endorses in choosing to give birth, the leaders of Western culture, and even the world, could discover that love revitalizes and connects the human consciousness, while destruction drains and alienates it.

Parturition, then, gives a woman a choice other than the ones enacted by the speakers of "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus." While these two women opted to imitate the violence perpetrated by patriarchal forces in order to replace them by female authorities, a politically informed and imaginatively active woman who gives birth can use her creative potential as a moral model for the patriarchy to follow. Through this process, power

structures change; a woman's mind and body become as culturally valuable as a man's, and the historical diagram of war becomes secondary to the goal of human connection and integration.

The Ariel poems "Nick and the Candlestick," dated October 29, 1962, and "Child," January 28, 1963, use symbolic juxtaposition to suggest that a mother's love for her child has the potential to limit the domain of cultural control. In particular, the mother restricts cultural forms of violence and destruction from entering the mother / child love bond. The mother also must control her own feelings of anxiety about her child's well-being in order to model hope instead of fear to her child. Both poems image a world separate from contemporary reality, yet the latter still exists, threatening to infiltrate the space reserved for love.

In "Nick and the Candlestick," the speaker describes herself as a "miner." She has dug into the earth and built a home beneath the surface of reality. The poem revises Plato's allegory of the cave. The cave the mother constructs represents two opposing fictions: the one she wishes to share with her child and the one that humanity has constructed for itself. Although not reflective of the external world, the mother must create a hospitable space to house the education of her child. Plato's allegory, the cave the mother transforms, represents reality's fiction—its false morals and beliefs whose remnants are dehumanization and human isolation. The mother changes the cave's atmosphere to visually create a positive alternative to the historical and contemporary images of violence:

> I am a miner. The light burns blue.
>
> Waxy stalactites

Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb

Exudes from its dead boredom.

Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,

Cold homicides.

They weld to me like plums. (lines 6-10)

In this tunnel, the mother carries a candle for light, and the dark air crowds the flame, limiting the space through which the speaker sees. The darkness—"black bat airs"—seems antagonistic to the miner, as it attempts to extinguish the candle, to kill the light that leads her way and that symbolizes her hope. In addition, bats drink blood; like vampires they live off the lives of others. The feeling of being drained by an exterior force or a memory of destruction latches on to her. Visually, Plath uses "plums" to image physical injuries. A plum, purple and fleshy, could represent a bruise, or if pierced by the fangs of a bat, a bleeding wound.

The mother describes the cave as threatening because metaphorically it represents history and echoes the language of the past:

Old cave of calcium

Icicles, old echoer.

. . . And the fish, the fish—

Christ! they are panes of ice,

A vice of knives,

A piranha

Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.

The candle

Gulps and recovers its small altitude. (11-12, 15-22)

The cave, then, represents the continuum of history into the present. It has no originality; it simply echoes the ideas of the past. In the cave, the "fish," a historical symbol for Christian love, becomes a parasite, drinking the blood—the life force—from the speaker. Still, her candle glows, and as long as she has light she can change the reality that confronts her.

The speaker needs to alter the environment of the cave in order to render it hospitable to love. She does this by reinventing its atmosphere, consequently diverting her perception away from the pain of the world and focusing it on the feeling of peace that her child induces:

. . . The pain

You wake to is not yours.

Love, love,

I have hung our cave with roses,

With soft rugs—

. . . Let the mercuric

Atoms that cripple drip

Into the terrible well,

You are the one

Solid the spaces lean on, envious.

You are the baby in the barn. (29-33, 37-42)

The speaker tells her infant that the hostility of reality is not the child's fault. Rather than viewing her child as an inevitable victim of contemporary brutality, the mother perceives her child as a possibility, "the baby in the barn," who holds the potential to revise the world in terms of love and compassion, just as was Jesus's intention. In this poem, Plath evokes the conflicted conscience of a mother by envisioning an environment antagonistic toward life. Plath represents this reality through images of a murderous history ("Cold homicides"), a decaying Christianity ("A piranha religion"), and a polluted nature ("the mercuric atoms that cripple"). The mother hopes to give her child an alternate reality, thus, both easing her own conscience and revealing to her child the power of personal choice and perception.

The world may indeed be hostile to individual growth, but together, the mother and child can overcome this hostility through the awareness of love. Admittedly, the mother attempts to hide the cave's reality by covering it with "roses" and "rugs," but this initiates the process of love: for love to exist, violence must be denied at least temporarily and

beauty must be given a space for human recognition. The mother identifies the temporality of this innocent condition by implying that her child is like baby Jesus, who countered humankind's destructive nature by modeling love and compassion. Likewise, the mother implies that by surrounding her infant with an atmosphere of harmonious human emotion the child can later use this personal history as a combatant for violence and as an example for humanity.

The ideas that Plath explores in "Nick and the Candlestick" are reiterated in "Child." In the former poem, the mother desires her child to perceive the love between them before realizing the painful reality that exists outside of their bond. The mother does this by limiting the space of the child's emotional awareness to a small sphere of beauty and compassion. In the latter poem, this same limitation is imposed upon the child in order to teach the child joy before discovering the anxiety, fear, and destructive tendencies of humanity.

In "Child," the mother focuses on developing her infant's imagination by introducing the child to pleasurable, non-threatening life forms. The mother perceives her child's mind as an empty "pool" into which she can pour images of beauty, thus delaying the child's awareness of the emotional unease that typifies humanity:

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
>
> I want to fill it with color and ducks,
>
> The zoo of the new
>
> Whose names you meditate—
>
> April snowdrop, Indian pipe,

Little

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star. (lines 1-12)

Plath writes of the child's "clear eye," and by connecting this image with a "pool" of water, we can recall the polluted lake of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." The lake in the short story symbolizes human imagination, contaminated by the reality of life. The lake contains images contrary to pleasure and destructive toward living: embryos in bottles, "dead bodies puffed as blowfish," "storehouses of hardware." More than anything, the lake is sodden with dirt: "The water is thick with these grains. They seep in among everything else and revolve under some queer power of their own, opaque, ubiquitous" (155). It is this type of perceptive suicide that the mother wants to guard her child from, at least temporarily. If positive images from the world fill the child's eye, then he or she can learn that the "Lake Nightmare, Bog of Madness" (155), the place where imaginative potential corrupted by American culture—corporate competition, materialism, and industrialism—runs to and rots in its own waste, is not an inevitable end.

Thus, the mother in "Child" wants to keep the "Wringing of hands, this dark / Ceiling without a star" from polluting her child's perception. In "Nick and the Candlestick," the small flicker of light from the candle symbolizes the mother's hope for her child. Counter to that image is the dark starless ceiling symbolizing that same cave without the candle, where hope and imaginative potential have been replaced by worry and fear. "Child" teaches us the necessity of nurturing our children's imaginations. Our fears are not theirs. We must allow our children to see life in terms of peaceful happiness and hope so that they make their own prophecies contrary to the prophecy of destruction diagrammed by history.

Plath's dream for the future is one that illuminates consciousness, that enables personal choice, and that emphasizes imaginative potential, particularly in the case of children. In order for our children to use love as a means for humanity's redemption, we must model love privately, publicly, and politically. Despite the fact that violence and destruction is a certain reality and that true innocence is a temporary condition, we can emulate an innocent state of mind by choosing the attitude that childhood represents. Yes, we must realize the potential of the destructive forces that limit our imaginations, teaching us to dwell on self-survival at the cost of a larger humanity, but we must focus on the possibility of human connection, on the colors that nature bombards us with—colors that demonstrate life in action—and on the basic model of nature's harmonious survival. In "Child," Plath enforces this idea by introducing her offspring to words like "April Snowdrop, Indian Pipe," names of flowers that signify a living world of beauty. This language offers children a positive, life-affirming alternative to the language of

"ideas" and "abstractions" that the Second Voice in "Three Women" identifies as hostile toward life.

Finding a Fix for Reality: Nature, Love, and Language

Recalling Tim Kendall's assertion of Emerson's influence on Plath, we remember that in finding spiritual connection with nature, Plath's poems often identify this merging as threatening and dangerous. This process threatens for two reasons: Nature is no longer pure; humanity has polluted and harmed it. To merge would mean to absorb a human imposed violence that resonates within the natural life form. In "Elm," the human persona who unites with the tree suffers the "atrocity of sunsets" in the same way that the tree does; thus, by merging with nature we implicitly become victims. We stand passively in the face of destruction. Thus, not only must we endure harm, but we must also succumb to it. Yet, ironically, despite nature's role as victim, its natural regenerative potential reinforces life's survival even though it must continually endure violence. Likewise, a woman's giving birth defies destruction because it proves that human regeneration is inevitable. True, the child will endure victimization. True, it will inherit the horrors of its parents and of history, but a child, like nature, still has the potential to exist harmoniously by choosing to create a mutualistic environment, rather than continuing the pattern of culture's parasitic livelihood.

In order to initiate this change, Plath suggests that parents and the rest of society immerse children's imaginations in positive world images, and in turn, these images will change the language of reality. This is the mother's dream in "Child." Instead of love being defined by the possession of materialistic objects, which we acquire only through

the cost of another human's dignity, let love find definition in an environment of imaginative freedom. Plath implies that such an environment is found in nature and in art. The former brings a peace of mind to the perceiver because each natural entity functions to secure a balanced ecosystem, and this balance models the conditions of beauty and life. Yes, violence exists in such a world, but this violence is not propelled by shallow desires like power and greed—all of which perpetuate a malevolent humanity. In a nature pure from humanity's influence, destruction forever perpetuates creation.

Like nature, art teaches us that beauty has a sublime value. In "Nick and the Candlestick," the mother's decorating of the cave exemplifies the use of art to both express and inspire love imaginatively. Love is an art form, and according to Socrates in Plato's Symposium, love desires to commune with the "good" and the "beautiful" (195). Recognizing goodness and beauty encourages continual contact with and creation of these forms, actions, and ideas. Love does not seek vulgarity—violence, destruction, and dehumanization. Plath understands this, and through her art she reveals the necessity of establishing love as the only recognized cultural authority.

As Plath shows in "Elm," "Purdah," "Applicant," "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," and "Lady Lazarus," among others, human destruction begets only more destruction. Like Eliot's The Waste Land, Plath's writing shows that violence perpetuates violence, until humanity is so accustomed to destruction that the emotions which repel this way of life are lost among the living dead. Although in some writings, Plath seems to advocate violence as a way to overthrow those who have been historically responsible for the corruption of the human consciousness, she is more likely mocking or parodying our culture's own behavior. Admittedly, we see anger toward and resentment

for the patriarchy in her writing, but even Plath realizes that these emotions are meaningless unless they influence positive reform. Plath seems to conclude that such positive reform is impossible through violent methods. Thus, she views her children as a means for human redemption.

Plath's poems that focus on her children emphasize the need for society to reform its hostile and fearful mentality. Images, other than those from the television screen and the shopping malls, must be introduced to our children's imaginations. We must revise the current images of love. Love cannot be mandated by contract, as in "The Applicant" or "Purdah." Neither can it be devised by following the cultural roles of mother and wife, as in "An Appearance" and as demonstrated by the image of the 1950's nuclear family. The corporate rhetoric, espousing that love grows from the acquiring of monetary objects—the Lexus, the diamond, the Nike tennis shoes—must be deconstructed. We must teach our children that these representations are false. Yet once we cancel out the reality we know, what is left?

Life and the affirmation of it: The beauty and reflection of the human consciousness connected to creation, not the language of fear, coercion, and destruction, but the language of love—boundless, timeless, and forever creating.

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